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THEIR OWN COUNTRY

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TO
MY HUSBAND
EARLE TISDALE HOBART
With love and respect

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FOREWORD

NONE of the characters in this book is a portrait from life. All are creatures of the imagination. Neither is any institution described an actual one. All alcohol plants have certain details in common. Consequently the description given is applicable to such plants wherever located. Likewise, the events related are not history. The town of Colfax, Kansas, as described in the book, is not any existing town, but a composite of many American towns. Kansas is used as the locale for the latter part of the story because it is on the edge of the most stricken part of the farm area. I did not wish to picture either the most hard-pressed or the most prosperous farm country. Kansas seemed to lie in between.

In the technical fields which I have had to enter in constructing this story, I have tried to be as accurate as possible and still not overburden the plot with detail. Therefore, in so far as has been possible, I have used the layman's, rather than the expert's language, in an effort to express the spirit rather than the technique of industry and music.

I should like here to express my appreciation to the many men and women who have put at my disposal the technical knowledge of their own professions.

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PART ONE

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THE evening express, within an hour's run of New York, seemed to Hester Chase to quicken its speed. The towns lay close together now. Their lights flickered almost continuously over her closed eyes. West of Chicago, on the endless stretches of desert and prairie, the train had seemed to push itself forward with intolerable slowness, making her feel that the journey might not come to an end in time. She sat braced into the corner of her seat, trying to ease her tired and burdened body.

The more observing of her fellow travelers, as they passed along the aisle, looked at her with mingled sympathy and curiosity. Her baggage bore the labels of a Pacific steamship company. Evidently this well-dressed, fragile-looking woman had come a long way. For what purpose they were in no doubt. The peculiar sunken look around her eyes, the high curve of her breasts and the full body told them. Some of them would have liked to ask if there was anything they could do for her, why she was traveling alone, and from where she had come. But something aloof about her kept them from doing so.

Hester did not notice their interest in her. Behind her closed eyes, her mind occupied itself with its own urgencies. To get to New York for her baby's birth was a terrible necessity which had driven her to this long journey alone—flight from the war and destruction in China, flight to the haven of her own ordered country, flight to its scientifically equipped hospitals had been instinctive.

But mingled with her driving instinct, confusing and bewildering her, were counter needs and demands. Years of the

interdependence of their marriage had woven Stephen and herself into a complicated personality. She groped continually for Stephen. She felt continually his groping reach for her.

Still dazed and distraught by the events which had ended in this long journey, her mind like a machine out of control kept re-creating the dark, emotional mystery of war which she had experienced in the interior city of China, their home during the past winter. Peasants and laborers fighting the rich—countless poor who had done the work of animals, refusing longer to do so. The sharp staccato of bullets, the confused murmur of frightened, fleeing people seemed now to be echoed in the noises of the moving train.

"Anything I can do for you, lady? We won't be long, now."

Hester opened her eyes. The porter stood in the aisle, his brown hands resting on the green velour of the seat back. She shook her head, reassured for a moment by the quietude of his elderly face. But as he moved on down the aisle, her mind settled again into its absorption.

She saw Stephen's face with its helpless bewilderment the night he knew that the great American Oil Company had demoted him. She thought of his years of slow inching up in the organization by hard, conscientious work—starting as number four in the branch office, then number three, number two, *taipan*, greater and greater responsibilities put upon him, in line at last for one of the few top jobs. Then his long record of efficiency wiped out in one night, when the Company's tanks had been destroyed by the Chinese mob. That he had risked his life to save the Company's property had made no difference.

The porter, on his way back, noticing the tight clasping of her hands, the contraction of her fine, thin nostrils, spoke to her again. "We're getting in, lady. Let me brush your coat, then you'll be all ready."

His words brought Hester sharply into the present. Would her old friend Vera Lichens be at the station? Stephen had cabled from China, asking Vera to meet her. To make doubly

sure, Hester had wired from San Francisco, giving Vera the exact hour of her arrival. But now she felt no surety that Vera would have received either cable or telegram. In the world of war and violence from which Hester had just come, nothing was certain.

As she walked along the platform among the throng of passengers, she wished she had let Stephen cable his friend Jo Tuttle. Surely one of the messages would have arrived. Then, at the top of the stairs, she saw Vera Lichens coming toward her through the crowd.

"Hello, Hester, my dear."

"Oh, I'm so glad you got my wire, Vera!" Hester exclaimed. "I was afraid you wouldn't."

Vera looked at her curiously. "Why wouldn't I? And of course I'd meet you. But I'm so sorry, Hester, I've got to race back to the studio. You've just caught me—I'm leaving on a concert tour late this evening to be gone three weeks. If I'd only known earlier, I'd have tried to arrange differently." Vera spoke with compunction, seeing how tired Hester looked. "Come along to a taxi. I'll direct the driver to the apartment I've taken for you, and I'll drop in this evening on the way to the train to make sure you're settled." She slipped her arm through Hester's. Vera's words and her strong touch seemed to Hester to swing the world back to normal. Then Vera was gone and the taxi was driving along the grey concrete ramp that led from Pennsylvania Station.

New York broke upon Hester's startled gaze. Tall building after tall building, new since she had been home before, reared its towering strength into the sky. The cab turned into Fifth Avenue, on the way to the apartment hotel Vera had chosen. The soft textures of rich fabrics spotlighted in shop windows, flowers in a florist's display spoke to Hester of the gracious living of her own people, the ways of plenty and safety. The crowds moved leisurely and unafraid.

But as Hester got out of the taxi, she had again that sense of precipitate flight driving her on. She hurried over the

collecting of her luggage, the formalities of taking the apartment, barriers between her and complete safety.

"Where would you like your baggage put, ma'am?" the man from the desk asked, opening the door into the apartment.

"Just set it down, please," said Hester, thrusting a little silver into his hand.

With a sigh of relief, she heard the latch click behind him. She looked around at the nestlike rooms, high up under the roof of the tall building. She was grateful for their sense of sheltered safety. From far below, the softened roar of the city seemed to hold aloft the still apartment. A little purr from the electric icebox in the kitchenette emphasized the quiet.

Vera's a dear, Hester thought. It's just the kind of a place I need. I'll feel safe here.

Her luggage she should have had taken into the living room. Well, never mind. When she was a little rested, she would unpack it. She went slowly into the bedroom, took off her hat and coat.

2

As THE days passed, Hester struggled hard to rid herself of apprehension. There was no need now, she told herself resolutely, for that sharp tautening of her nerves at any unexpected noise. But she found she was uneasy even when a maid came in to straighten the rooms. The sound of another person moving about brought back those last days in the interior, when she and Stephen had never been in any doubt as to the threat of hungry men, and any sound might mean the stealthy entrance of the mob into their house. She began more and more to take care of the apartment, finding to her surprise that the work steadied her. She wondered a little if in the years of idleness, of letting herself be waited on by Chinese servants, she

had not missed something—something wholesome that in times of stress might have bulwarked her courage.

The late afternoon sun struck across the kitchenette. It was difficult this evening to wash the few dishes left from her solitary dinner. The weight in her body seemed intolerable as she moved about. She needed Stephen. In her planning to come home, she had not thought what it would be like to be without him now. She steadied herself against the cupboard. How long must she be without him? The rebuilding of China into a peaceful, prosperous country might not be accomplished during Stephen's and her lifetime. Would she dare to take her baby into such danger as she had just fled from? She knew she would not. Where, then, does this lead us? Is Stephen to live there and I here?

She was very tired. Without undressing, she fell asleep across the bed, waking to apprehension—a land broken by revolution and famine, and Stephen caught in it. Night was in the room. She got up, looking out at the lighted windows of the city, piled high one row upon another. The jeweled top of the Chrysler Building, the fine spires of a church, gigantic needles outlined against the smooth surface of a skyscraper. Even in the deep night, whenever she had looked out, there was an endless procession of lights. The city throbbed with its own greatness and power, sheltering her under the wings of its light and sound. Why was it not sheltering Stephen, too?

A grinding pain, beginning slowly, spread through her loins . . . pain such as she had known only once, long ago, and forgotten. But now she remembered.

If Stephen were here, she thought dully, he would call the hospital now, get me a taxi.

Slowly she made her way to the telephone.

As the nurse wheeled her into the delivery room, for one fleeting moment Hester remembered the little house in the far-away Manchurian town, where under the fumbling hands of the old doctor, she had lost her first child. No doubt now of the rightness of the instinct which had brought her to New

York. She looked gratefully at the doctor, the nurses, the spotless equipment, and gave herself without fear to the ordeal ahead of her.

Dimly through the first moments of the anaesthetic, the beat of the city reached her. A sudden leap of her mind before oblivion . . . Stephen . . .

"You've a fine boy, Mrs. Chase."

"The cable . . . to my husband?"

"It's already been sent."

Against her side they laid her son. Ten years was a long time to have waited for him.

3

STEPHEN had been transferred twice since Hester's going, this time to a small station in a province where civil wars had been followed by a long drought. He knew well how to build up a business that had suffered from recurrent wars and poverty, knew from long experience how to catch the first instinct of a people to return to normal after catastrophe. Many times the Company had used him for just such a job. But his very ability showed him quickly that there would be no comeback here. It was as if the exhaustion which lay over the land were a final exhaustion. In spite of all he could do, business had dwindled until there was only an occasional can of oil sold to a landholder.

The Company must have known I couldn't sell oil here, thought Stephen, when after weeks of intense concentration he found himself faced with idleness. This is the kind of thing that makes a man go to pieces. A lonely place, and no work to do.

In him was the slowly growing conviction of why the Company had sent him here . . . it was the first step in getting rid of him. Due to the war, the oil business was contracting.

There were too many men in line for top jobs. His part in the loss of the tanks had given them their opportunity. He remembered, years ago, how the manager of the Manchurian territory, affectionately called the "old boss" by his men, had been made to break himself. The Company had used a little matter of a godown for an excuse then. It had been a tangled and confusing set of circumstances, in which they had sought to establish that the "old boss" hadn't taken care of the Company's best interests. In the small station to which he had then been sent, the boss had brooded over wrongs, real and fancied, until, in his embitterment, he had neglected his work.

"Well, they've made a mistake this time," Stephen said grimly. He set himself a definite pattern of tasks for each day. "After I know Hester's all right, I'll go out over my territory."

Stephen rose from his office chair, his pipe gripped hard in his teeth. From the upstairs window of the building which did duty for office and house in the one-man station, he could see over the compound wall and across the empty plain. The houseboy ought to be back. He had sent him into the city hours ago to find out if a cable had been received and the telegraph company, by chance, had neglected to send it out. He guessed he'd ride in to meet the boy . . . no telling how long he'd be.

A short way from the city he met the servant sauntering along the road. He reined in his pony beside him.

"Yes, master. This time a message." Out of his hatband carefully he took the envelope.

Timothy arrived safely.

The message he and Hester had agreed upon if the child were a boy.

Stephen reread the meager words. Questions crowded his mind. Had Hester had an easy time? How was she? What did the baby look like? . . . Was he strong? *Timothy arrived . . . safely.*

His mind said he had a son, his emotions hung suspended. Inadequate, this shadowy son . . . his wife little less so. Only

the memory of the fastidious delicacy of her face—her steady grey eyes filled with a restrained eagerness, her sensitive mouth with its humorous upward lift at one corner when she smiled. What did she look like now? Would having the baby make her different?

"But they're safe," Stephen said to himself. "Safe and cared for."

Riding slowly homeward, he looked across the bleak, worn-out land. Denuded hills stood against the horizon. Great gullies cut across the plain. An old plain, eroded through the centuries. Between the gullies were small tablelands, where a little wheat might be grown in a year of rain. In this dry year, the soft loess was blowing.

He could never bring them back to face such desolation as this. No, nor for their sakes could he risk hunting a job in America. Even if from now on the job here were only one of marking time, even if he could see Hester and his growing boy only at three-year intervals on home leave, he at least gave them security. For security one must pay a price.

He reined in his pony to tie his handkerchief over his mouth and nose against the heavy dust. His eyes under his hatbrim were quiet and steady.

4

ON A June evening, Hester brought her baby to the apartment where she had waited for his coming.

"I hate to leave you here alone," said Vera Lichens, who had come with her from the hospital. "You need someone to help you. I think you ought to have a good maid."

Hester drew back. "Oh, I couldn't trust a stranger."

"Oh, come now," coaxed Vera. "I know just the person. A Swedish girl. She's very gentle, and she's had brothers and sisters of her own."

"Do you know her really well?"

"Suppose I send her around and let you talk to her." Vera rose to go.

Not very much changed, Hester reflected, from the Vera with whom she had lived when they had studied music together here in New York . . . self-possessed, resourceful, always ready to take over the practical management of those around her when she felt there were things to be done. Vera, in the years they had been apart, had made a professional success of her music. She had won for herself a reputation as a concert violinist, and was one of the teachers at the New York School of Music for the especially talented. Now she was struggling to establish herself as a conductor, even though she knew that conducting was the most difficult field in all music for a woman to enter.

And here she is, thought Hester, with a little rush of affection, giving of her time and energy to settle Tim and me!

When Vera had gone, Hester stood looking down at her baby, lying on the bed barricaded with pillows. Then she began unpacking his things she had brought from the hospital, unwrapping the crib, bathtub, and toilet table she had had sent in from a downtown shop, moving lightly about the rooms. She would have liked to dance tonight, so featherweight were her body and her heart.

Bent on keeping the hospital routine, Hester rose early the next morning. Putting her hand behind Timothy's back firmly, as the nurses had taught her, she lifted him, laid him on her lap, began undressing him. The sturdy child seemed fragile to her unaccustomed hands. As she carefully bent his arm to get it out of the sleeve of his nightgown, he cried a little under her tentative touch. Then she felt herself steadying to his needs. Her hands suddenly knew what to do.

A little, vacant smile passed over his face. Hester's heart crowded her breast. Slowly, as she worked, some starved center of her being was fed, the repressed longing of years passing into fulfillment. The soft warmth of his body penetrated the

thin silk of her kimono, bringing her a poignant sense of possession.

With the suddenness of a very young baby, Timothy dropped off to sleep. Looking down at him, noticing that strange separateness that sleep gives, even to the very young, Hester thought of him for the first time as a personality apart from her own. She studied the small body closely.

He's got Stephen's skin, and his hair and eyes. She opened Timothy's fist, laying the fingers back one by one. Stephen's square hand . . . the same short, capable fingers. She cuddled his tiny feet. The narrow Chase heel, so hard to fit to a shoe. Physically, he is all Stephen. She felt a humorous delight over Nature's making the two of them so alike. And then, suddenly, she felt an acute anguish, thinking of Stephen.

He had been on the point of resigning his job after the Company had demoted him, when, in sudden panic over the struggle ahead of them she had told him that she was going to have this child, knowing in her heart that it would shake his purpose. She had not been able to face the uncertainty of his getting started again in America. If she had not been afraid, he would be here with her now.

The baby stirred a little on her lap, his lips sucked aimlessly. She was instantly aware of his needs. She ought not to nurse him until she was calm. Thankful that he still slept, she went into the kitchenette, getting her own breakfast, resolutely putting aside the needs of the man for the more immediate needs of his son.

But later, when she had fed Timothy and he slept again, she sat down to write to Stephen.

"Stephen, dear,

"Timothy and I want you to come home. We left the hospital last night, and I bathed him myself this morning, for the first time. He's so beautiful, Stephen. He hasn't a single blemish, and he's like you. You mustn't miss a single day more than you need to of him.

"When I left you in Shanghai, I know you felt there

was no other way but for you to stay in China. I let you think so. I don't know how I could have. It must have been because I was pregnant that things seemed so terrible to me. You know that pregnant women often have curious obsessions.

"We were unnecessarily frightened by the poverty in China. I can understand that, now. Seeing such misery we thought the whole world was like that. But Stephen, if you could see America! Everybody's working and happy, and there's never been a time of such prosperity. You must come. It would be absurd, dearest, to think a man of your ability couldn't find his place quickly."

She went on writing long after she had anything left to say, putting in small, inconsequential details, lengthening out the precious experience of being in touch with him. As she sealed the letter, she felt that she had set right something that had been wrong between them. He will feel free now to come home, she thought, as he wanted to in the beginning.

5

THE question of a maid to help with Timothy settled itself easily. When Hester interviewed the young Swedish girl, Anna Olsen, whom Vera sent, she found her apprehensions over having another person in the apartment were gone. From the first, the rosy-cheeked Anna adored Timothy. After a day or two, Hester felt wholly content to leave him in her charge.

With Anna's help, Hester arranged the apartment, organizing it now to take in Stephen's needs. Space for his clothes in the shallow closets; that big, comfortable chair would be his, a table beside it for his pipes. As she unpacked her trunks, she was surprised to find that Stephen had put in all their most cherished Chinese possessions. He must surely have been planning for us both to come when he did this, she thought. It strengthened her belief in the surety of his coming now.

Anna asked endless questions about Stephen and China. "You say he's used to Chinamen doing the housework?" she asked, getting up from her knees. "No man could make floors look like that," she added with pride.

"No," said Hester. But for a moment she thought of the sheen on Ningpo varnish floors. She saw, too, as Anna's sturdy, well-kept figure passed her, the poorly clad Chinese manservant, whose single duty had been to see that no footmark marred the clear, mirrorlike surfaces. A service possible only in a country where poverty made labor cheap.

With a sense of deep happiness Hester faced the time before Stephen's return. She was fascinated with each manifestation of her own country. She found that she loved the mounting heat of the city and that Timothy thrived on it, too. He was her child in that. She loved to walk through the streets, feeling the hot, glowing light cast off from the high walls of the great buildings. It gave her a sense of material well-being.

There was a delicatessen store in the apartment house that entranced her with its piles of vegetables and fruits, its glass-covered cases of cooked meats and salads. She would stand before a pyramid of oranges, reveling in the sense of their inexhaustible supply. It seemed as if she could never get enough of the sight of such abundance. Imagine it, she thought, there was a time in Manchuria when I dreamed of just one orange. She took a deliberate delight in buying salads and cold meats and planning a meal made up entirely of prepared dishes. In China, every drop of water, every morsel of food carried the menace of disease. Here, the mere eating of fresh foods, the drinking of unboiled water gave her the tangible assurance of her present safety.

As, little by little, she renewed old friendships the material comfort of the city wrapped itself around her. All of her friends seemed well-to-do. They talked of stocks and bonds in which they were doubling, trebling their money. America had arrived, since the War. It was the richest country in the world, unbounded resources, unlimited progress.

Hester counted the days, estimating the time it would take for Stephen to get her letter. But July passed into August, and still no answer came.

I ought to have had a cable by now, she thought. He must have been out somewhere in his territory when my letter arrived. He's been delayed in some way, she reassured herself.

Then, late in August, when she came in one day, the familiar, foreign-looking envelope with its Chinese stamp was in her box.

"I don't think we'd better risk it, dear," the letter began. "My home leave is due in fourteen months now. I can look around then and see if it's safe to resign."

The letter dropped into Hester's lap. She felt angry and hurt because of her disappointment. He was not coming. Not a word about what she had written him.

Then, as she fingered the thin folds of his restrained, non-committal letter, her anger died away. Four, nearly five months had passed since she had seen Stephen.

I have no way of knowing what his problems were when he read my letter. After all, I must trust him to decide. I wonder what his station is like. There is no war or famine there, or surely I should have seen it in the newspaper. Stephen, if I only knew how you are! Fourteen months is such a long time!

Tim was waking. She could hear him fussing to himself. Slowly she laid the letter aside. Going into the bedroom, she leaned over the crib. Tim had just gathered himself together for a strong and lusty protest, his knees drawn up, his hands made into tight fists, his face puckered for crying.

"Poor little son! He's hungry." As she lifted him, he flattened himself out in final anger. Then, as she gave him her breast, he surrendered, lying soft and pliant in her arms. A special, subtle delight in her son took possession of Hester.

6

STEPHEN had kept his word to himself—undertaken the hard task of covering his territory in a series of horseback trips. He could then make a report to the Company based on first-hand knowledge. It had meant disciplining himself to swift, forced marches, returning as quickly as possible to his station for supplies, for he had to depend when traveling on what food could be packed on his own and his servant's ponies. He was inured once more to the hardships of travel, his mind made keen by the problems he had to meet during these weeks.

This last journey had carried him into the worst of the famine afflicted country. Here there was no longer any bark left on the trees to eat. All who could leave had gone, abandoning their farms and their shops. Those who remained were dying. Stephen was filled with a pity that exhausted him with its uselessness. Three million, four million people starving, and in the port cities it was hardly known. He thought of the head offices of his Company. Would they believe his report?

He awakened one morning to find that his servant had fled in the night, taking all the supplies. Stephen blamed himself for not realizing before how overwrought the man had been. I should have foreseen it, he thought. Poor devil, I don't wonder he lost his nerve and couldn't face going on. Stephen turned back at once, traveling as fast as he could to get to food.

Hour after hour the wasted land spread out before him. The farmhouses stood stark and unroofed against the sky, roof-beams and doors long ago sold to buy food. The skeletons of the dead and the dying huddled in corners. The sun poured down with a metallic brilliance upon the plain. Occasionally a landowner's compound, the gates barred and guarded, loomed up before him. Although Stephen knew that rice and other food were hoarded behind those high walls, he also knew the uselessness of asking there for help. A little lightheaded with the pinch of actual hunger, he held to the fantastic idea that

the Company would send wheat instead of oil into this territory.

Toward evening he came to a broken-down inn. As he drew in his pony, he heard voices inside the door. An innkeeper doing business? Incredible! Entering the great main room of the inn, he saw that it was empty except for one table at which sat a group of young Chinese. On their sleeves they wore the red band of the Red Army. He saw, too, that there was food on the table—two bowls of coarse millet, and tea.

Stephen hesitated a moment. He had reason to fear these men. They hated foreigners for their exploitation of China. But he was desperately in need of food.

"I wonder if you could help me out," he said at last, moving forward. "My servant has deserted me, and I have nothing to eat."

Silently they made room for him, pushing toward him millet and tea. "Eat," they said, the courtesy of their race overcoming their hatred.

"We have more. A near-by landlord gave us this," one said with sarcasm.

Then Stephen knew that they had taken the food by force from a rich man, and that they were here to organize the peasants.

"The landlords are stealing all this land, for taxes," said the young man, turning a smoldering glance toward Stephen. "There is grain enough stored in their compounds and in the cities to feed those who are left living, and to make a spring planting, if there is rain. But the peasants have no chance, as things are now."

"No," said Stephen, "they haven't."

"You are a missionary, perhaps?"

"No. A business man," said Stephen simply.

"Then you are against us."

Not before in a Chinese had Stephen ever met such directness of statement. "No, I am not," he answered, as frankly. He liked these young and purposeful men, and he was grateful

to them. "When you are in the town where I live, I should like to offer you my hospitality," he said rising.

"You ask us to your house?" exclaimed one incredulously.

"Yes," said Stephen. He mentioned the name of the town where his station was located.

On his return to his station, Stephen found that Thornton, the assistant general manager, was coming up from Shanghai to talk over business with him. Busy as he was with preparations for Thornton's visit, Stephen forgot the little incident at the inn, forgot to explain to his new houseboy that the Red soldiers might call.

When Thornton arrived, Stephen learned that Shanghai was not satisfied with the returns from this section.

"Then you think," Thornton pressed him finally to commitment, "that there will be no business here this winter?"

"Yes," said Stephen. "That's my judgment, after going over the territory. There's no trade where people are starving."

"You said something about the Red Army getting control around here. What would that mean?"

"It might mean spring crops, if we have rain and if the Red Army can get hold of enough seed grain."

"Well, then, wouldn't there be an opportunity to sell oil a little later, if we hang on?"

"I doubt if the Red Army would allow it. You know they consider our business foreign exploitation," Stephen answered.

"You mean it would be dangerous?"

"Yes, it would be dangerous." Stephen knew Thornton wouldn't want to recommend closing the station for that reason. He had been put in his present position because he was young and would take more risks than an experienced man. That was why he had been jumped over men like Stephen.

"From what I've heard, you aren't one to be stopped by a little risk," Thornton said.

Stephen looked him straight in the eye. "It's a question of losing money."

But Thornton was not satisfied. A week passed and he was

still unconvinced, although there had been only a few cans of oil sold.

One morning as they were finishing breakfast, they heard an urgent banging on the iron gate of the compound, then the sharp click of a pony's hoofs against the hard-packed earth of the courtyard. Stephen's new houseboy appeared in the doorway. His warm, yellow skin had turned to a sickly white, his eyes usually so blank and inexpressive were full of terror. "Master," he began, "the soldier insists he must see you." Before Stephen could answer, a soldier, red band upon his sleeve, stepped past the houseboy.

So the Reds have taken the city, was Stephen's first reaction. Maybe, he thought ironically, as he rose from his chair, Thornton'll have a chance to make a first-hand decision on danger now.

Then he saw that the soldier advancing toward him was holding out his hand. He was the spokesman of the group Stephen had met at the inn.

"It is an honor to return your kindness," said Stephen, shaking hands. "Please sit. This is Mr. Chang," he went on, turning to Thornton, "who helped me out of a nasty predicament on the trip I told you about."

Thornton, with some alacrity, returned the man's greeting. Stephen saw relief in his face.

"Bring tea," said Stephen to the houseboy.

The houseboy, also relieved, again his deferential and suave self, brought tea, served the three men with ancient politeness, offered the cup to the soldier with his two hands.

After a little, Thornton rose, saying, "As you are old friends, I think I'll leave you." He bowed himself out.

For an hour Stephen and Chang talked of conditions in the province. Stephen asked many questions, received direct answers. Chang spoke with earnest frankness.

He's vital and real, thought Stephen. However I may feel toward his theories, I can respect him as a man. The suave expediency of Chang's elders, which had brought China to its

present predicament, was absent from Chang. Stephen's deep interest in this ever-fluid race was roused anew.

"My band of men is coming. There may be fighting here this winter. My advice to you would be to get out," Chang said at last, rising.

"I don't know if my Company will agree to that," said Stephen.

Chang gave a little shrug of his shoulders. His face was expressionless. He proffered Stephen his card, clicked the heels of his cloth shoes soundlessly together and went out.

So Chang has ridden ahead of his soldiers to warn me, thought Stephen. And he's left me his card in case I'm caught. Then Chang had liked him.

Stephen smiled. Chang was like his forefathers, after all, in one quality. Once he's accepted me as a friend, the relationship of friendship transcends everything else. He intends to protect me, even though his party considers the foreign business man is the enemy of his country. Stephen put the card carefully away in an inner pocket of his vest.

In the afternoon, Thornton began getting his things together. "I think I'll push on," he said casually. "There doesn't seem to be anything more for me to do here. I guess I know the situation pretty well."

Stephen missed Thornton. In spite of their difference of opinion over keeping the station open, they'd got on very well together. The companionship had been good. In the long evenings, they had had sound men's-talk.

I wish Thornton had said whether he was going to stand by my recommendation. If not, I'm here for the winter. Something to face, alone, but he could do it if he had to.

In the evening he walked around the compound, along the wall at the north where the tanks stood, threaded his way between them, turned a sharp right angle, followed the wall again down toward the other houses—dark and empty now, since the shrinkage of the oil business—back to his own. His nightly exercise. He entered through the office.

He'd have to think up some way to keep busy. Idleness would destroy him. Well, if Chang were right, he would not be idle. He caught himself wishing for fighting to strike this part of the country. Danger would keep me on my toes, he said to himself. Then he put the thought from his mind with shame.

Going back through the house and into the bedroom, he noticed the Company's small lamp on the stand by his bed. He stood looking down at it, its red base shaped like a cup and holding just a Chinese rice bowlful of oil, its chimney the size of a child's plaything. He it was who had first thought of this lamp to make light popular in China.

He picked up a picture of Hester from his dresser. It was a snapshot, the picture of her he liked best because she was smiling. He studied it for a long time. Sitting very still, he imagined he could hear her light step, feel her hand on his shoulder.

But in his great need of her, he felt an exaggerated necessity to keep her from knowing what he was up against. He hoped he hadn't let any of his difficulties get into the letter he had written in answer to hers asking him to come home. He hadn't answered her, really. In the beginning, when she had accepted his decision not to resign, he had seen what she expected of him as he never had before—had seen that anything less than her present way of life would be insecurity to her. It was not that he blamed her for expecting it. It simply meant that whatever she said about America, for her sake he could not risk the struggle and uncertainty that might be involved in getting a fresh start.

7

THE first gale of the autumn equinox was sweeping New York. The east wind, cold and fresh from the North Atlantic, drove the rain in long, slanting lines down the corridors between the

tall buildings, cleansing the city of the summer's enervating heat. The millions of workers felt a quick stepping-up of energy.

Hester stood at the window watching the people in the street below. Even as they turned the corner, something in the pitch of their umbrellas, the slope of their shoulders, showed which of them would take the crosstown buses drawn up at the curb halfway down the block. These were busy people. Their economy of motion fascinated Hester, accustomed to a nation where years of unemployment had made people aimless. She felt her nerves responding to the purposeful tension of the city.

She turned from the window, going quickly about her dressing. I'll have to hurry if I meet Vera on time for luncheon. I mustn't make her late. She's so busy.

Drawing on her gloves, she leaned over Tim's crib for a final look before leaving him.

"You can't imagine," said Hester, as she and Vera sat down to luncheon in the crowded restaurant, "what I've been doing all morning."

"No, I can't," said Vera. "I've often wondered what you do with your time. Why did you give up your music, Hester? You played like an angel. Better," she added, after a pause, "than I did, once. I should think you'd miss it. Don't you?"

"I knew I'd have to give up my career when I decided to marry Stephen. Obviously there was no place for it in China, and that was where his work was, as you know. I've never been able to make you understand the Far East, have I?" Hester answered, a little resignation in her tone. "Perhaps you have to live there to understand."

"You told me once there was a fine orchestra in Shanghai," said Vera relentlessly. "Did you ever try for a chance to play with them—soloist, even for one concert?"

"But I lived in the interior," said Hester, "except the last months I was in China, and then I was too much out of practice."

"Why didn't you keep up your practice? That's what I can't understand."

Hester felt herself taking to cover—a strange feeling that Vera might get behind her guards, and that if she did, some protection she had would be gone, and with it the happiness come to her since Tim had been born. "No white woman can live in the interior and keep energy. Your Chinese servants make you as helpless as they can. It's the way they keep their jobs," she said quickly. "You can't imagine what it's like, Vera. If you do any work you lose face, and then your husband's business suffers. You can't live in the East without face. In the white communities in China none of the business wives ever did anything but play cards. Chinese women of the same status spend their time playing *mah jong*."

The expression on Vera Lichens' face was changing slowly to one of understanding. "Don't fool yourself." She spoke a little curtly. "What you mean isn't peculiar to the Far East. It's luxury you're talking about. Stephen was able to give it to you and you took it. That it happened in China doesn't mean a thing."

"There, I knew I couldn't make you see," said Hester, sensing in Vera's words the professional woman's scorn of the married woman's leisure.

Vera turned her head, looking out of the window, and Hester caught the disciplined lines of her face, an austere beauty like a spiritual magnet in the midst of the chattering crowd around her. Until now, America had meant to Hester only material security. Looking at Vera Lichens, she had an impression of something else America had to offer.

"I don't know why," Vera said at last, turning back to Hester with a troubled look, "ease should be such a temptation to artists. Of course, I suppose it is to anyone, but one feels that if art is really man at his creative height, it should be tough. With all its demands of discipline and hard work, you'd think it would give something lasting to the human spirit."

"Doesn't it?" asked Hester, again aware of what it had given Vera.

"I'm a music teacher," Vera said simply, "near the top of my profession, I admit. Over and over I've seen fine artists—not musicians alone—people with untold hours of heart-breaking work behind them—given a little money or recognition, and they lose all their desire to create."

"Poverty and lack of recognition also destroy artists," Hester retorted, stung by the implication of what Vera had said.

"Yes, I've seen that happen. The human spirit falters under that, too. But," Vera added, in a matter-of-fact tone, "you were talking about the indolence of the Far East, my dear, and I answered you."

For a moment they were silent. Then Vera stretched a hand across the table and touched Hester's hand. "I've intended for a long while to quarrel with you about this," she said, smiling. "I can't bear waste. Stephen's not coming home this winter, Hester. Why don't you get to work again?"

"With a small baby to care for?"

"Perhaps you couldn't come to the studio and all that, but at home—"

"I doubt if the management would allow me to practice violin in the apartment," said Hester.

"I saw to that when I chose the rooms. I've a young woman studying with me. She hasn't taught before, but she's good," Vera went on. "You might study with her. She's working very hard to get enough to pay for her music courses."

Hester was a little taken aback. "I do need something more to do," she admitted. "My time's not half filled up. I hadn't thought of going back to music. But I'd want to study under an experienced teacher. You, for instance, Vera."

Vera shook her head brusquely. "Perhaps in a year or so. Mary Trencher is just the one for you, now."

"What would be the good, Vera? I couldn't take up a professional career. I don't even want to."

"I agree with you. But that's not the point."

"Well," said Hester doubtfully, as they prepared to go out into the storm. "I might try it. Send your friend to see me."

From the top shelf of a closet, Hester took down her violin case, still carefully wrapped in oiled paper. Stephen's thoughtfulness, again. He had known how the humid heat of the Yangtze Valley might have warped or cracked the delicate instrument. She ran her fingers over the polished wood, looking down at the perfectly matched halves with their identical graining. Parallel as slanting lines of rain the fine grain of the Norwegian spruce showed under the light varnish.

She thought of herself as she had been in this very city, years ago, before she had gone out to China . . . so absorbed in music that her father had almost had to bribe her to go with him on the trip to the Far East.

Music was my world then. Thinking back to those days, she realized what a vast gulf of time and experience separated her from them.

To abandon her career as a musician had cost her considerable struggle, but in the end she had given it up for Stephen. Obviously there could be no career open to her in a country like Manchuria, she told herself. But again she had the uneasy sensation she had felt when Vera had asked her why she had given up her music.

I can't remember when I played last, she thought. That something in her did not want to remember she could not acknowledge. She moved restlessly, replaced the violin in its case.

THE wind and the rain had not stopped, when, a few days later, Mary Trencher went to see Hester. Getting in the lesson was going to crowd her program—mean that she would have

almost no leisure time. But she welcomed both the money and the experience. More, it was a deep satisfaction that Vera Lichens had considered her good enough for this job.

She hurried into the apartment she shared with Geraldine Marsh. She had stayed a little longer than she should have at the studio, but one of the other pupils had not come because of the rain, and his absence had given Mary the chance for an extra hour in the practice room.

Jerry was curled up in an easy chair, a pad of paper in her lap, the floor around her littered with discarded sheets.

"Hello. Working?" asked Mary.

"Well, trying to," said Jerry. "Waiting for you to come home, really."

With swift movements, Mary got out her best suit, started to put it on.

"Now don't tell me you're going out again," protested Jerry.

"It's the day for that teaching I told you about."

"Oh, dear, I forgot. But why on earth did you put it Saturday afternoon?"

"I hadn't any other time."

"But the weather today!" Jerry glanced out of the window at the rain coming down like a great translucent sheet. "That's an excuse not to go. Why don't you call up the woman and tell her you've been delayed by your other pupils? She'll be all the more anxious to take of you, if she thinks you're a popular teacher."

"Oh, shucks, Jerry! You know I haven't any other pupils. Probably she does, too. She's a friend of Lichens'." Mary slipped into a fresh blouse. "There. I guess I'll do," she said, surveying herself in the mirror. "I won't be in until late, after the show tonight."

"You're a fool to work so hard, Mary." Jerry curled herself more comfortably into a little ball.

"You do, too," said Mary. "You were writing copy when I came in."

"Well, just to fill in the time until you got home. I've been trying all week to think up something original about a new brand of silk stockings."

"Are they a better brand?" asked Mary.

"How do I know? It's my job to say so." Questions like this from Mary always annoyed her. Mary was like a school-girl, in ignoring what a person had to do to get on. And yet, she often reflected, Mary's very blindness to this had made her tie up to her, as to a pier. Jerry floated on fluctuating waves of expediency—shifting, sliding planes of climbing up the grade, sudden skids down. Mary seemed always to act from some hard inner core, inviolate, secret. Jerry had an uncanny ability to pick the locks of most people's secrecy. It lessened her interest in them. She couldn't do it to Mary.

"I'm fed up," she said aloud. "Stockings on a detached leg in a showcase have got me down." She swung her own shapely legs over the chair arm.

Mary stopped a moment, looking down at Jerry's face, so often, nowadays, pinched with the nervous drive of her ambition. It was an arresting face, with its keen eyes and assured mouth. Jerry's friend, Leonard Packard, had once said that her face looked as if it had been put together by an expert—nose, eyes, and mouth all so well-matched. "Just the right size for each other."

"Why don't you make Lennie take you to a show tonight—something good and funny? Make him blow you—drop in at the night club on the way home." Mary was used to Jerry's week-end moods.

"Well, maybe," Jerry answered.

"I'll look for you." Mary went out. She had to wait for the automatic elevator. Someone was using it, or had forgotten to close the door. She looked at her watch. She hoped she wouldn't have to walk down.

It was coming now. She got in, shut the door, touching the button. She was shot down through the apartment house with its many separate cells of life like hers and Jerry's, one-

room, two-room apartments, with a kitchenette hidden behind a panel. She went out into the storm. On the first day she had liked the way it had washed over the streets. But this afternoon the city looked sodden.

A little diffidently Mary followed Anna from Hester's immaculate hall into her no less immaculate living room. In the walk from the subway, the rain had driven against her, wetting her skirt where her coat had been blown back. The bedraggled skirt, her ankles uncomfortably damp, seemed to contribute to a certain reluctance she felt for the task of helping this well-to-do woman to get back what she had voluntarily let go—or so it seemed to Mary. Vera Lichens had told her that for years Mrs. Chase had done nothing with her music. Taking it up again now was probably a passing whim to fill in a few idle hours until her husband's return. Music to Mary was something one did not trifle with.

And yet it was too good an opportunity to let slip. As Vera Lichens had said, teaching would be another approach to music. But Mary could not help but wish her first bit of teaching might have been for a promising young person.

Beyond a closed door, she could hear a woman and a baby conversing together, in the way she recognized mothers and babies had, the soft, brooding tones of the woman's voice, the delighted crowings of the baby. She sat down stiffly on a straight chair.

I wonder if Mrs. Chase has forgotten I was coming today. Perhaps Jerry was right, after all. A little impatiently she glanced around the room seeking to interest herself.

The white porcelain figure on the bookcase, the ornately carved bronze vases that flanked it, the two pictures without perspective on the wall all made the room seem very foreign to her. The art that Mary knew and liked was realistic, bold and without ornament. She forgot her annoyance over the necessity to wait, got up and stood before one of the pictures, trying to decide why it suddenly interested her.

Hester, hearing the rain beating against the window panes,

had thought with a sense of relief, surely Mary Trencher would not come this afternoon. Anna's announcement that Miss Trencher had arrived broke rudely into her dreamy delight in her motherhood, enhanced by the warm comfort of the apartment which so completely shut out the cold rain. She rose from the bed where she had been sitting beside Timothy. "Tell her I'll be in in a moment," she said.

She entered the living room unobserved by Mary, saw her standing before the picture that Stephen's friend Ho had given her, years ago. For a moment she studied the tall girl. She was simply and plainly dressed, with the smartness that New York gives; there was nothing, at first glance, that particularly distinguished her from hundreds of other girls. Then Mary's hand, resting on the chair back, caught Hester's attention. It was singularly interesting to her, with its long, untapered fingers, lean and muscular.

Mary turned.

Fine eyes. Art would probably be tough in her, was Hester's silent evaluation of this girl whom she had somewhat unwillingly consented to have for a teacher.

Mary, making her own swift evaluation of the small, poised woman in the doorway, realized instantly that she couldn't docket Mrs. Chase with quite the surety she had expected to.

"Miss Trencher? I am Hester Chase, your pupil." With a humorous smile hovering around one corner of her mouth, she moved across the room holding out her hand. "How shall we begin?" she asked, with a directness that Mary liked.

"I've chosen something simple," Mary answered, seating herself where she could watch Mrs. Chase to the best advantage.

Hester was a little annoyed. She was unable to rid herself of a certain humiliation that she, once an accomplished musician, should not be so recognized now. Like Vera Lichens, this girl must think me a dilettante, must see in me what she, a professional, doesn't wish to become. I'll show them both that I know how to work, she determined, picking up her violin.

But she had not counted on the passionate need for perfection in Mary. The first phrase Mary demanded repeated over and over. Hester's attention wavered. She heard Anna go into the bedroom, knew she was taking Tim up.

"Again," said Mary.

"Oh, *not* again!" said Hester.

"It must be right or we can't go on with it," Mary protested, stubbornly waiting for Hester to begin again.

"Of course we can go on," said Hester. "We can't niggle over one phrase like this and hope to get the sweep of the music. This is simple, but it's good. Technique's one thing, spirit's another."

Mary looked genuinely shocked and then scornful. "That's not honest work."

Hester glanced down at the girl, so sure of herself, so certain that nothing could ever trip her, keep her from this honest work she talked about. What did she know of the dual demands made on the artist who married? After all, life had something to do with music. The essence of music *is* life. Hester started to speak, then saw the futility of trying to tell Mary anything in her present mood. Anger spread through her. Why, she'd played well, years before this child could hold a violin! In her rage, she drew the bow across the strings, playing the piece to the end.

"Well?" she said, challenging the now silent Mary.

"You did get an effect," Mary owned grimly. "But your tones weren't good or clear. You know it wasn't right."

For a moment they stood glaring at each other, then all at once the humor of the situation struck them. To the astonishment of each, the other began to laugh.

"We certainly stir each other up," said Hester, a little ruefully, as soon as she could speak for laughing.

"Why, yes, we do," said Mary.

"I suppose Vera knew we would. You'll be good for me, Mary Trencher," said Hester. Then, after a pause, she added, "We'll be good for each other."

Mary, sure in her youth, did not yet see what Hester would do for her.

"I'm afraid my wrist is too tired to go on, today," Hester said. "I really am out of practice. Suppose we don't play any more. Can you come next week at this time?"

"Why, yes, if you wish," said Mary stiffly, unwilling to give up so easily. She rose.

The door closed on Mary. Hester turned back into the living room. The words rang in her ears, "That's not honest work." She felt hot with shame.

She moved about the room, trying to put the matter out of her mind. She got Tim ready for the night, took a book with her to the table to read while she had dinner. But finally when Anna had gone and there was no longer any little thing she could do to keep herself busy, the afternoon with its return to music made an insistent demand on her attention.

Some locked and sealed old part of her life had opened in that curiously emotional moment when she had let herself be angry and play in an unmusicianlike way. She knew when she had played last, and it had been jagged, uneven playing. She saw the vast Manchurian plain, the Company house under the shadow of the tanks, the grave in the doctor's compound . . . her baby's, born dead.

In that intolerable time when the full realization had come to her that her body no longer held that other life nor did it exist anywhere, she had tried to play. Some instinct toward healing had sent her fumbling toward music. But music had meant less than nothing to her. With anger she had turned from it. She had smothered out the experience of music ever since, moving, as it were, carefully, as if by languor she could smother pain, until she no longer remembered music as having had importance in her life.

Now, sitting here alone, she realized all at once that she was able to think with serenity of that time. The healing she had so impatiently demanded had somewhere through the years taken place. Ever since Tim's coming, she had felt vital.

Creative energy, long dormant, was whipped now into action by Mary's words, "That's not honest work."

9

AT BOTTI's night club, where Mary Trencher played in the orchestra, she went about her dressing for the evening's performance. The carefully cut evening dress, of a sophisticated, cool red, chosen by the manager of the night club to be paid for out of Mary's salary, was the most beautiful and the most expensive thing she had ever possessed. She took a peculiar pleasure in wearing it. It marked for her the first step toward success in her profession.

For months after she had come to New York, she had earned her living as a file-clerk, getting in her practice in the evenings and her lessons in the late afternoon. This opportunity at Botti's had been a streak of unprecedented luck.

Jim Sawyer, whom she had known at the State University of Iowa, and who was trying to get a footing in law as she was in music, had made a friend of the Italian, Botti . . . had sat next him one night in the gallery at the Metropolitan. Botti had found out that Jim played the clarinet well, and had offered him a chance in his restaurant orchestra. Jim had persuaded him to hire Mary.

A little reluctant at first—the orchestras in night clubs were almost invariably men—Botti had finally seen the excellent dramatic effect of having a colorfully dressed woman among his players.

During the prohibition years, such restaurants as Botti's had learned that they must take on an atmosphere of richness and the impregnable, which offset their vulnerability to raid. By a hundred subterfuges, the managements maintained such citadels of escape. Botti had perfected his place from month to month. Every smallest detail, such as Mary's dress, had been skillfully planned.

Years ago, he had had a small restaurant in lower New York. When prohibition had come in, it had seemed natural to him to see that his patrons should receive the wines to which they were accustomed. Wines were as natural to Botti as bread. By the time he saw that certain obligations to his bootleggers would prevent his drawing back, he was also seeing, with large astonishment, how much money illicit liquor could bring. Money would let him fulfill his dream of years—put music into his restaurant. His place had grown popular, he had moved uptown, he had increased the number of his musicians.

Mary was wholly absorbed each evening in giving the best performance she could. She knew she was fortunate in having this chance to play with a group of well-trained men.

Softly, lazily, the musicians began to play. Mary enjoyed playing jazz. Child of America, born to the exuberant racy humor of the farm, inheritor, too, of the American melancholy, the one slipping quickly into the other in this kind of music.

Late in the evening, Mary saw Jerry and Lennie Packard come in, take a table near by. Tall as Jerry was, she seemed small beside Lennie. Six-feet-two, with tremendous shoulders and a chest that expanded like a bellows. . . . "They make us like this down in Texas," was his boast. With his big, soft palms hollowed to make the sound boom, Mary saw him clapping. The people at the other tables followed his lead, then waited for what would come next, sipping their drinks.

At second intermission, as the musicians got up, Jim Sawyer came over to Mary. "News for you, Mary," he said. "It's my last night here."

"Really? You got the job, then!" Mary was excited.

"Yes. The Wollkarts took me into their law firm today." He spoke the name Wollkart with no little pride.

"Let's go and tell the others," Mary exclaimed.

Together they walked down to the table where Lennie and Jerry were sitting.

"Hello," said Mary. "Listen to what Jim has to say."

"I was just telling Mary I got through the doors of the Wollkart law firm today."

"Good for you," said Lennie. "They're the best in town, they say, for a young man. Awfully slow working up, but I guess you won't mind that." Lennie, since he had become a collector of debts, had learned to estimate people pretty accurately. Long ago he had sized Jim up. He'll work his head off for the Wollkarts. That's the kind of young man they look for.

Lennie glanced about the room, saw with complacency the air of wealth about most of the tables' occupants, the easy flow of money. He intended to be rich someday. By what medium he did not know. It might be by his splendid baritone . . . money in his voice, if things broke just right for him. Or his chance might come in the telephone company, where he was now working. His success as a special collector of bad bills had already brought him attention. Monday would be the first of the month and his big drive. He meant to make it spectacular.

Mary and Jim rose.

"See you later," said Jim.

As they took their seats among the musicians, Mary noticed the happiness in Jim's eyes. He's worked hard for his chance, she told herself.

Mary's violin had no part in the next selection. She looked over the crowded center of the room, picked out Jerry dancing with Lennie.

Jerry's got over her mood. When she's happy, her dancing's as smooth as silk. Lennie's been good to her tonight. Poor Jerry. Why she said "poor Jerry" she didn't know. But in spite of her almost gaminlike shrewdness, Jerry seemed defenseless to Mary. All her life the defenseless had made demands upon Mary.

It was not until the end of the evening that she looked again for Jerry. She was not on the dance floor. The table where

they had been was vacant, too. They've gone on to some other place, she thought.

Restless Jerry, and Lennie, the good spender, generous and hard. The two qualities jostled about in Lennie. Mary recalled with a slight feeling of distaste some of his clever stories of how he used all kinds of tactics to get little and big bills paid for the telephone company.

She was tired when at last she changed again into street clothes, walked along the alley which led from the old mansion that housed the night club, to the street where Jim always waited for her. The rain had stopped and the stars were out.

"Let's walk," said Jim. "You know, I won't be seeing you so much, Mary. That's the only drawback to this new job. Wollkarts run their young lawyers on shifts. I'm on the night shift. They have a stenographic pool which operates twenty-four hours a day, so you can always get a stenographer. I tell you, it's a busy place."

"Your clarinet playing's so good, Jim. It seems a shame to give it up."

"I shan't," said Jim. "I mean to practice in my free time. It's an eight-hour shift at Wollkarts! I go on at six and work until two."

They walked on, silent, as good friends can afford to be.

They had come to be very good friends in the last two years, sharing the stresses and strains of their struggle to get a footing each in his profession. With Jim, it had come to be more than friendship.

The silence, Mary felt, was lasting too long. Too bad to spoil Jim's triumph tonight with another refusal.

"I gave my first lesson today," she said suddenly.

"I'd forgotten you were going to, in my excitement," he said contritely. "How did it go?"

"It didn't," said Mary with a little laugh. "I mean as a music lesson. She couldn't stick it, today. I don't know whether she'll do much. She's actually lost her music."

"Out of practice, you mean?"

"No. I mean," said Mary, "she seems to have lost something I didn't think you could lose once you had it. The thing that tells you when you do good work and when not."

Jim gave a low whistle. "Too bad. But you get tripped up sometimes."

"Perhaps," said Mary. "I'm going to work her hard. She deserves it. Look, Jim, I feel as if my lungs were full of stale air and my muscles all tied up from sitting. Let's run."

The street was empty at this hour. The crosstown blocks were long. They took hold of hands and ran, Mary's feet and Jim's beating a tattoo on the pavement. They brought up breathless and laughing at Mary's corner.

10

WITH a dogged determination Hester made her preparation for Mary's next coming. She let Anna take Tim for his daily airing. She was pressed with a necessity to find out if she could get back what she had lost. But again and again she put down her violin, her mind crying to be let go. It was not only her wrist and fingers that had lost their suppleness. She was unable to endure the mental discipline of creating music. With a kind of hard willfulness, she drove herself to work, coming to the end of each day tired and discouraged, realizing that she had lost something vital when she had let the power to create go from muscle and brain. A poignant homesickness swept over her for some place of the spirit she had once occupied when with accuracy and strength she had drawn her bow across the strings of her violin.

On Saturday, when Mary came again, they went through the work Mary had planned for the afternoon without interruption.

"You're better," said Mary, at the end of the hour. "I see you've been practicing."

"I have," said Hester. Then, at this meager bit of praise,

she felt a sudden giving way of the tension under which she had worked all the week, and a sudden desire to hold on to Mary Trencher during this aftermath of endeavor. "Won't you stay and have tea with me?" she asked. Seeing Mary hesitate, she added quickly, "Wouldn't you like to see my little boy?" Not waiting for an answer, with quick light step Hester left the room.

It was pleasant here this Indian summer afternoon. The windows of the apartment were open, the wind blowing the curtains. It's nice of her, Mary thought.

In a moment Hester reappeared, her slight figure bent a little under the weight of the baby, her black hair with its undeniable touch of grey and his light, downy head close together.

Strange, thought Mary, that she should only now have a child. "He doesn't look like you," she said aloud. "But little babies just look like themselves, don't they?"

"Really, he's like his father." Hester added, "My husband's never seen Timothy," then turned away for a moment, settling the baby in her lap, pulling the tea things nearer. Looking up, she said, "Tell me about yourself . . . I mean as a musician. Are you working toward a concert?"

"I'd like to get on the radio. It offers the best pay," said Mary off-handedly. She saw no reason to reveal the hard purpose of her musicianship. She added, "Just now, I'm playing in a night club."

"Solo?" asked Hester.

"Oh, no. With the dance band. I was lucky to get in. There aren't many women in dance bands," Mary told her. "Each one of the men is a head-liner with his own instrument. Botti, the manager, sees to that. The saxophone player is especially good. Wouldn't you like me to take the baby while you pour the tea?" she asked.

"Oh, no, he's fine," said Hester, nestling him in the crook of her arm. She liked the lack of pretense about this girl. Some musicians, wishing to impress her as an artist, would have

deprecated the necessity to earn a living by playing jazz, even if they had secretly enjoyed it. And I imagine Mary Trencher does enjoy it, Hester thought with a little smile.

As she lifted the teapot with her free hand, a truck on the street below backfired with a series of staccato sounds. Although muffled a little at this height, it startled her. She set the teapot down with a quick jerk, slopping tea over the tray, held the baby close with an involuntary gesture of protection.

"Oh," said Mary, "what is it, Mrs. Chase?"

"The noise in the street frightened me," Hester said. "It sounded like guns." Seeing Mary's questioning look, she went on, "I really should explain. I've been home only a few months from China. There was war there, you know."

A sudden wail came from Timothy.

"I must have frightened him," Hester said. "Would you ring for Anna?"

"You're holding him a little tightly, I think." Mary got up, gently took Tim, hushing him against her firm and serene breast. She looked at Hester with a smile. "I'm used to babies. At home, we're a big family." She rang the bell.

Anna came, carried Tim away to his crib.

"I don't often do that, now," said Hester. "At first I didn't feel safe anywhere. But I'm learning to." Quietly she passed Mary a cup of tea.

Mary remembered the headlines in the New York papers of less than a year ago, telling the tragic happenings of revolution in China. "Were you in danger yourself, Mrs. Chase?"

"Yes," said Hester. "We got caught in the interior. My husband had responsibilities to the company he belonged to."

Mary felt a sudden admiration for this gentle woman, quietly and steadily now pouring herself a cup of tea, talking undramatically about what must have been a time of anguish and terror. She realized that her first judgment had been harsh and untrue. Mrs. Chase's taking up music again was no passing whim. She wasn't that kind. That she had had such an experience of violence and destruction stirred Mary deeply.

Mary, who since childhood had never been able to pass by distress of any kind without rushing to relieve it, felt a sudden reaching out to Mrs. Chase.

"I've got to go now," said Mary, rising at last. "Thank you for having me to tea."

As the work went on, Mary found that she had to change her original judgment still more. Lying dormant in Hester's mind was a subtle and imaginative awareness of music, which, when it broke through the hard crust of disuse, opened up to Mary conceptions that even Vera Lichens had never given her.

And then at times there would come to Hester a laxness and indifference that enraged Mary.

"I don't understand," Mary lashed out one day, "how you can let yourself do it."

A flush dyed Hester's cheeks. "You despise me a little for it, don't you? I don't suppose I can explain, Mary. A few months ago, I wouldn't have tried to."

"Oh, don't, Mrs. Chase! Don't, now." Mary was close to tears. "I get angry because, really, you've something the rest of us haven't."

Lightly Hester rested her hand on Mary's shoulder. "Give me time, Mary."

For a moment their hands touched.

11

STEPHEN had been ordered at last to close the station. Kendall, the general manager in Shanghai, evidently basing his action on Thornton's report and the subsequent ones Stephen had sent, had made a nice bit of calculation. He had held Stephen in the station long enough to sell what oil remained in the tanks, had had no more sent in. And yet he was removing Stephen from danger before the problematical spring

advance of the Red Army. If revolution hit the province again, the Company would lose only its equipment.

The final days at the post had been busy ones for Stephen, packing up the files, sending them by freight to Shanghai. It was with a quiet sense of triumph that he packed them. They were in perfect order. He made his last inspection of the compound, instructing the Chinese caretaker in his duties as watchman. "Look well," he said, "to the tanks. Keep the gate barred."

Through the gate he walked for the last time. He could hear the caretaker's shuffling feet moving across the court within. He jumped on his pony and without once glancing back rode toward the fold of the hills, the gate out of this land of drought and death. The hills stood in dark grandeur on the horizon. Denuded of all wood, they had a soft, velvety texture.

Transportation over the great stretches of country was slow and inadequate. First by pony, then by train, often delayed, Stephen traveled toward the coast. At Peiping he had to wait for a train south.

The early morning sun was sending slanting rays of light against Peiping's battlemented walls. He took a ricksha, riding into the Imperial City of gleaming yellow roofs falling into ruin. Across vast court after vast court he walked, through a city of horizontal grandeur—the wide spaces of the stone-flagged courts surrounded by low marble balustrades, the fretted buildings beyond with their long roof-lines flung upward at the end in a bold curve. A wind had come up, blowing dust in a fine brown haze. Stephen thought of the devastation of the country he had just left, its dust even now filtering down, eroding the hard marble of these balustrades.

That evening he took the train for Shanghai, ready for whatever his new job might be. If he had luck, he might be stationed in a district where he could have Hester and Tim with him. Was the Company, perhaps, now intending to station him in Shanghai?

But when he entered the offices of the Company on the day after his arrival, he had a sudden sense of uneasiness. He saw there had been curtailment on every hand. A smaller staff of accountants, a smaller number of those Chinese hangers-on so characteristic of any thriving business.

Outside the general manager's office, Stephen waited. Finally Kendall came out. "Hello, Steve. Come on in," he said.

"Long time no have see," said Stephen, using the phrase so common in greeting old friends in China. He was determined to put from his memory the incident of their last meeting. It had been Kendall, suddenly made manager to the chagrin of older men in the Company, who had turned the affair of the tanks into one that had discredited Stephen.

"Sit down," said Kendall. "You look fit. Have a good trip?"

"Fine," said Stephen.

"Well, it's a busy morning with me, so I guess we'd better get down to brass tacks. You wanted to resign once. You didn't."

"Because you asked me not to."

Kendall ignored Stephen's words. "How about doing it now?" he said.

"And why?" asked Stephen.

"A resignation will give you a better chance at home in getting a job."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning I'm asking for it." A hard, cold light had come into Kendall's eyes.

"And why?" Stephen asked again. "I've done a good job up there. You know it's been pretty dangerous."

"You seem to have had friends," said Kendall, tapping his fingers on the desk in the old irritable way Stephen knew so well, "who could be relied on to take care of you. The entertaining of Red soldiers isn't a custom of the Company. Suppose the lawful government of the country should hear we were carrying on that kind of subversive activity? We don't do things that way." Kendall spoke with cold precision.

"You're through, Steve. But I'm giving you a chance to resign."

Stephen sat for a moment thinking hard. They'd wanted to get him and they had got him, as they'd got the "old boss," years ago. If he let them fire him as they did men who had really done something to discredit the Company, he would be given, according to custom, a month's salary for every year he had been with them. Should he stick and make them fire him and take the money? Twenty years. It was quite a sum. Better not, he thought. Being fired is a nasty thing to have on a man's record, and Kendall could make an ugly story out of the Red soldier incident. In the tank business, Stephen had had public opinion with him. He couldn't hope to have it in any matter that concerned the Reds. The thoughts shuttled quickly through his mind.

"Very well, Kendall. I resign." He spoke quietly. "But I know as well as you do, you're cutting down staff. Why not say so and let it go at that?"

"I've engaged a passage for you on the next steamer, if you want it," said Kendall.

Stephen turned and went out.

He walked back to his hotel, ordered a drink. Well, that's that, he said. I suppose I should have known.

12

FEBRUARY had seemed long, March didn't promise to be any shorter. Only half over, the time to wait for Stephen's return.

It had been a little shock to Hester to find that the contacts she and Stephen had had in this city, without him lacked vitality. There was Stephen's old friend, Jo Tuttle. She had always enjoyed him and his penetrating, pungent observations on the practical world in which he moved. But the friendship was actually between the two men, she now realized.

It did not take on life in Stephen's absence. Flowers from Mr. and Mrs. Tuttle when Tim was born, an invitation to dinner, later, which she could not at the time accept. Other friendships had lagged, too.

In Stephen's absence the masculine world receded farther and farther from Hester's door. She longed for the closely woven web of masculine doings. She felt irritable at times, missing the richness of body and mind that was Stephen.

"Tim, what shall we do?" Hester had got into the habit of talking things over with him. He was nearly nine months old now, and trying, when she let him, to stand up. She was sitting at the piano, holding him on her lap. It was Anna's afternoon out. "Let's see if you can play, Tim." She struck middle C.

Tim put his two hands down on the keys.

"Tim, that's dreadful! Do it this way." She directed the forefinger of his right hand up the scale.

The telephone rang sharply.

With the baby on one arm, she went to answer it.

"May I speak to Mrs. Chase, please?"

"This is Mrs. Chase."

"We have a cable for you."

"Will you read it, please?"

"Yes, madam. It reads: *Resigned. Reaching San Francisco April first. Love. Stephen.*"

"Thank you. Will you mail the message?"

She found it difficult to get the receiver back into place. When it was finally done, she sat down in the nearest chair, leaned her head against Tim's small chest, so inadequate for support. The months she had been without Stephen seemed unbearable.

STEPHEN paced the deck of the Pacific liner, eagerly watching for the first glimpse of his own country. He was almost alone

on the great deck. Most of the passengers were below attending to passports and luggage. For hours a fog had hung low around the ship, retarding its progress. Now, all at once, Stephen felt a stepping-up of the engines' slow throb. He saw that they were steaming beyond the fog into blue water, and that to each side of them were the headlands of the Golden Gate. The passengers began streaming out to see the magnificent spectacle of this approach to America—the lovely bay, San Francisco climbing its hills, its tall buildings massed along its waterfront.

Soberly Stephen surveyed the tall buildings, business houses of America's trade. From the offices of such a house on the other coast of America, he had gone out twenty years ago, young, hopeful, with a sense of importance, considering himself a part of the march of Western civilization, proud to belong to his country's history of settlement and trade. Now, not only he but most of the passengers on the ship were the end of a dream that had plagued the mind of the West for centuries—the great romantic fable of the Northwest Passage.

From the counting houses of Europe men had first gone out hunting that passage to the riches of the East, believing that within the frame of earning a living they could set their dreams of progress and of a man's individual place in that progress. Incredible things had been done under the stimulus of those dreams. Incredible hardships had been borne. Columbus imprisoned; Hudson set adrift among the ice floes. America discovered . . . and to what purpose? To fill the pockets of the kings and business lords of Europe.

The old fable passed on to men like himself, who within the frame of earning a living hunted again a Northwest Passage to the Far East. He recalled the splendor of the moment when the idea of a three-cent lamp for China had come to him. Helping on the great American dream of progress, accepting boredom and hardship and danger. Now he knew that like other men before him since the beginnings

of trade, he had been exploited for the purposes of business. He had simply helped American business to dip its fingers into the gold pot of the East. Well, the gold pot was empty now, the Eastern treasure exhausted. America was the only gold pot left.

We're a shipload of unemployed, he thought. We know now that we only sold oil and tobacco.

He joined the other passengers at the rail, watching the great ship maneuvering for its dock. He saw the people waiting on the shore, listened to their cries of welcome. His mouth under his clipped mustache lost its bitterness, took on tenderness. After all, he was coming home to his own people, his own country, to Hester and to Timothy.

14

AS HESTER CHASE rode down Park Avenue, she saw New York in all its vertical grandeur shining in the morning sun. At Grand Central Station, she waited for Stephen's train. Track 22, they had told her. *On Time*. Hester's heart seemed to jump into her throat. In a few moments, Stephen would be here, in this station.

She paced up and down before the blackboard, holding Tim tightly in her arms.

"Tim, darling!" She squeezed him.

Beyond the iron grille, she saw the shining, black engine slowly coming to a standstill. The gates were pushed back.

People passed by in ones, in twos, in groups. At last she saw Stephen, walking alone, a pipe gripped in his mouth, his eyes searching the crowd. Now he saw her! Oddly familiar, his gesture as he dropped the pipe into his pocket. A little thing like that the most real thing about him. Stephen . . .

"Hello." At the familiar measured and quiet tone, she had the sensation, almost physical, of steadying herself against a support.

Then both she and Tim were in his arms, his lips pressed to hers.

Tim began to cry. Stephen loosened his clasp, drew off, surveying his son, smiling. But Tim clutched his mother tightly, burying his head on her shoulder.

"It's just that he doesn't know you, dear," said Hester.

"Of course." Stephen rested his hand a moment lightly on Tim's back. "Here, let me take him. He's too heavy for you." Before the child could protest, Stephen had taken him into his own arms.

Once within the apartment, they poured out the thousand trifling events of their separate lives, important in these first moments together, breaking off to touch hands, lips.

"I've brought things for Tim," said Stephen. "I forgot, though, he'd be so little." He looked ruefully at the delicate Eastern playthings he took out of his bags. On a brass tray he set frail half-inch-high figures of warriors with fierce, diminutive beards, and tiny ladies, then touched the tray with his hand, setting them whirling.

"Never mind. He'll grow up to them," said Hester, looking over his shoulder. "At present, a wooden spoon is more his style." She was between laughter and tears, seeing how inadequate had been Stephen's shadowy knowledge of his son, who just now was steadying himself against a stool in an effort to stand, then sitting down suddenly, unable to accomplish it.

"How about using me as a support?" Stephen sat down on the floor, gently helping Tim to stand, coaxing him at last to sit tentatively on his knee.

Solemnly Tim surveyed him. The rough texture of Stephen's tweed coat was a new kind of thing to feel, transferring to his baby brain a new sensation, too new to be quite pleasant. Ever since his birth, Tim had been associated only with feminine things—his mother's hands, the soft flesh of her breast, silk and fine wool in his crib. Now this, the rough surface of a man's cheek, the scratchy stuff against his tender

skin. His lip began to tremble. Then he broke into a wail, holding out his arms to Hester.

"He's getting tired," said Hester. "It's 'way past time for his nap." She lifted him in her arms, carrying him into the bedroom.

Stephen followed, stood at the foot of the crib, looking down at them. Hester was taking off Tim's clothes. His shoulders under the tiny knitted shirt were sturdy and strong. Both strange and beautiful his son seemed to Stephen. And Hester . . . how beautiful she was, bending over the half-comforted child. Their separation with its sharp hungers, its dulled longings, could be forgotten now.

Hester rose, facing Stephen. He held out his arms and she went to him. Their love enveloped them in its warmth and safety.

That evening they talked, planning their future. Then, slowly, Hester realized that the barriers of separation could not be so easily dissolved. There were things standing between them that should be explained beyond any shadow of misunderstanding. She must get behind Stephen's guard, know the happenings over which he had been so silent in his letters. "What made you finally decide to come home, dear?" she asked. "Was it what I said in my letters?"

A mask seemed to settle over his face. "Let's forget the past," Stephen said. "It's over and done with."

I shouldn't be so impatient, she thought. I'm crowding him. She had forgotten how different were their tempos, his so much more deliberate than hers. It gave her a sense of rest to feel the steady, slow beat of Stephen's way of life. She felt no anxiety now for their future. She could leave it to Stephen.

Watching Hester, Stephen had a deep sense of satisfaction. Not like the woman who had left Shanghai nearly a year ago. She was strong and well now, and with a new eagerness about her. He felt rewarded, feeling he had given her this year with-

out anxiety. That was the way her life should be, enjoying Tim and her music. She had spoken in her letters so often of how she had taken it up again.

Hester woke in the night. Tim? She started to get up. No, Tim was quiet.

Through the room drifted a familiar scent. She drew it in with every breath. It was what had wakened her.

Manchuria. Her first night there—awakening suddenly, made uneasy by the strange Eastern odor which now clung about Stephen's luggage in this room in New York. She lay down again, drawing close to Stephen. For a long time she lay thinking, his head against her shoulder. The scent in the room brought back to her, too, a vivid, accurate picture of the young Stephen. She had been sitting on the arm of his chair, and he had been talking to her of the development of Manchuria. He'd fallen silent, forgotten her, absorbed in his dreams of progress. "You're an artist," she had accused him. "Only artists dream." "I'm not dreaming, I'm thinking," Stephen had answered.

Something that had been essential to him then was gone now. With a passionate desire to understand this older Stephen, she pressed her lips to his forehead.

15

Day had come when Stephen woke. Trained as he had had to be so long to the threat of danger, he was instantly alert in the strange room. Then his mind clicked to his new surroundings. He was in America. He heard the pounding throb of traffic far below him in the street. A thrill shot through him at the unaccustomed presence of Hester, her delicacy intensifying his own heavier, more solid, self. He looked at the sun advancing across the ceiling of the room. Tim was talking to himself in his crib.

"I think I'll start getting the lay of the land this morning," he said to Hester at breakfast.

"So soon?" Hester asked. "No vacation?"

"It may be a little difficult to get started," he said. "I've got enough put by to carry us for a while, but I don't know how long it will take to make connections. I've been away so long. My plan is to see Jo Tuttle first. What's he like, Hester? Has he changed much?"

"No, I don't think so. I haven't seen much of him. Are you going to 'phone him?"

"Oh, no. I'll just drop in. It's fun to surprise Jo. He'll be able to advise me," Stephen went on.

Hester could see he had thought it all out. An old college friend like Jo was his best approach.

The leisurely breakfast, the sense of serenity Hester gave to a room, made this a delightful moment for Stephen, freed for a time from the daily pressure of business routine. "When I've found out how things are going to break, I might take a vacation," he said.

As he stepped outside the apartment house, he stood for a moment on the pavement, held by the magnificence of New York, the antithesis of China with its tarnished and faded grandeur. Into high, blue space the skyscrapers thrust their shining new bastions. Trained to adapt quickly to constantly changing situations, Stephen felt himself carried easily into the spirit of New York. He had closed the gates of the past. With a man's normal reaction to the present, he was ready to begin over. He passed one subway station, walked on to the next, enjoying his first contact with the busy, hurrying city.

After all, he thought, it's a little early in the day to hunt up Jo. Even a man's best friend ought at least to give him a chance to look over his mail first.

Jo's old address was the same. He thought with pleasure of Jo's office—always a very masculine spot, with heavy oak desks, plenty of wastebaskets, Jo, often in shirtsleeves, lean-

ing back in his swivel chair, his feet on the desk. The farm implement business which he had inherited, he had continued to run with something of the easy atmosphere of the country store where his grandfather had started selling plows. On Stephen's various home leaves, he had dropped in often to see Jo and had always been welcome.

But to Stephen's surprise, when he stepped out of the elevator, he stood in a reception room, correct and formal. Stiff little chairs stood against the paneled walls; a black and white etching adorned each pale green panel. Blocking the way to a series of closed white doors was a handsome desk, behind it a correct and formal young woman.

Whew! thought Stephen, Jo's come up in the world. For a moment he wished he had telephoned for an appointment, as Hester had suggested, but he'd looked forward to Jo's surprise and pleasure at seeing him unexpectedly.

"I wonder if I could see Mr. Tuttle," said Stephen. "The name is Stephen Chase."

"Have you an appointment?" asked the young woman.

"No, I haven't," said Stephen. "I'm an old friend of his."

"Mr. Tuttle is in Europe."

"Oh," said Stephen.

His evident disappointment made the girl realize that there was no need here for that guarded watchfulness against the plausible intruder. "I'm awfully sorry," she said. "If you'd care to see Mr. Breckinridge, who's in charge during Mr. Tuttle's absence, I'll see if he's at liberty."

"Tom Breckinridge?"

"Yes."

"He's an old friend, too. I would, thank you."

She spoke softly into a receiver. Then, turning back to Stephen, she said, "Mr. Breckinridge says will you come in."

She led him the length of the softly carpeted room through a door at the end.

"Well, you big stiff! Hello. When'd you drop in?" Breckinridge, a brisk man of forty, rose from behind a desk.

"Hello, Tom. Glad to see you. It's good to find one familiar face. They tell me Jo's away."

"Yes. I'm carrying on while he's gone. How do you like the new office set-up?"

"Fine. Gone pretty grand, haven't you?" asked Stephen.

"Oh, about the thing other companies of our size do," said Tom carelessly. "We've grown, you know. Jo left the arrangements to me. Think, myself, it's pretty good."

Same old Tom, thought Stephen. Chesty as ever.

"Sit down," Tom went on. "Home on leave? Things are pretty hot out in China now, aren't they? How long you going to be in the city?"

"Not going back," said Stephen. "I resigned a month or so ago."

"You did! You must have a million then, or a hell of a lot of nerve to break away from a job like that."

"It was too hard on my family," said Stephen. "I want to find something here in New York. That's what I came around to see Jo about—thought perhaps he could tell me what openings there are in my line. What about it, Tom—can you give me any idea how to go about getting an executive job?"

"H'm. I don't quite know. . . ." Breckinridge looked away, out of the window, and Stephen sensed a change in his genial manner. "Tell you what you do, Steve." His face brightened. "Jo'll be back in a couple of weeks. Why don't you come around and see him then? Jo's got a lot of connections, and he'll know how to advise you better than I would. I don't suppose you're in any great hurry. Probably want to take a little vacation, anyway, don't you? I remember how your mother always wanted you to make her a long visit after you'd been away even a few weeks in college."

"She died while I was out in China."

Breckinridge looked genuinely shocked. "Oh, I'm sorry," he said. "I admired her very much. I always have remembered how lovely she was, those times we went home for Easter or Christmas vacation with you. I am, indeed, sorry." He made

a respectful pause before saying, "Suppose you'll be hunting up the old crowd, won't you? There aren't many of them in the city, though. Purcell's here—you know him. Tuttle's got him in the shipping department." He rose.

"I'd like to see Bud, but some other time," said Stephen, taking the hint. "I mustn't keep you now, Tom."

Outside once more, Stephen walked briskly along the street, trying to rid himself of the unpleasant conviction that after Tom Breckinridge had known he was out of a job, he had not wished to re-establish their old friendship. After his many years in offices, Stephen knew almost by instinct when a man was hedging. Tom was playing safe. But why did he feel he needed to?

Stephen felt bewildered as he thought over the interview. For a moment he wished himself back in the shelter of his old job. Strangely enough, he now realized, thinking of Tom's manner, it had offered him more dignity than independence seemed to.

He went toward his college club, seeking a place where he belonged. The rooms were empty at this hour in the morning. He looked through the directory to see if any of his old friends had offices near by. The man at the desk was new, could tell him nothing.

Stephen went out again, wandering through the city. Perhaps Hester and he might just as well go off on a vacation, wait until Jo got back. "I'll go home," he thought, "and we'll plan it."

As he let himself into the apartment with his latchkey, he looked about. In the first delight of his homecoming, he had taken its security for granted. Now he saw it suddenly in terms of income. He couldn't afford to be long without a job.

Looking out of the window, he could see row upon row of apartment houses. Perhaps enough food in those kitchenettes to last through the next morning's breakfast. The furniture, like that in his own apartment, either the property of the

landlord or bought on the instalment plan. He had a sudden realization of the economic law of his own land. Not such a long distance from starvation were the people of America. The only security the thin margin of the job. In all the years of the average man's life, not ever could he relax from earning money.

He found he had no stomach for a vacation. His mind fastened tenaciously on getting a job.

"Stephen?" Hester called out, coming in with Tim in her arms. "Did you see Jo? Could he help you?"

"Jo's in Europe."

"Oh," she said, a little anxiety in her voice.

"But he'll be back in two weeks or so. In the meantime," Stephen hastened to say, "I'll be in touch with some of the men I used to know through my college club."

With his casual tone, she was reassured. Stephen saw, after all, that it was he himself from whom she drew security—not the wealth of America she had written him about.

All at once, for the first time, Tim smiled at him.

"Take him," whispered Hester, over the top of Tim's head.

Gently Stephen lifted him, sat down with him on his lap. Tim laid his head on Stephen's arm. After all, that stuff that scratched was all right. When it came near you, it was a safe thing. It held securely. It lifted you up, it was strong. Nothing to be scared about.

16

A FEW days later, Stephen was sitting in the lounge at his club, wondering what would be his next step. It seemed as if there must be something he could do for himself, instead of waiting around for Jo Tuttle. He had come in at the noon hour, hoping he might run into someone he knew. He watched, from behind his morning paper, the strangers who strolled in and out of the lounge.

Georges laid the letter on his desk. "Do you speak it less well now?" he asked.

"No," said Stephen steadily. "My reasons for resigning were personal. Chiefly, the interior of China at present is no place for my wife and small son."

"Oh? A good many jobs take a man away from his family, of course. What were your other reasons?"

Stephen started to explain the confused issues—the chaos and revolution in China and his own part in them—but under Georges' uncomprehending blank stare, he stopped. This was nothing a man could explain for himself. "I believe I could get a written copy of my record for you," he said.

"I have one," said Georges. "I am sorry to tell you that just now we have no vacancies for a man of your age and experience."

Stephen rose. "In that case," he said, "I don't quite understand why you have found it necessary to ask me a number of very personal questions." He turned, striding angrily across the dim, soft-carpeted length of the room.

The big organizations, he thought, must be interlocked more than he had realized. Was he out with all of them because he was out with the Company? What did the Company mean when they told their employees that a man never got on very well after he resigned?

Nonsense. His hurt pride was making him morbid. He'd have to be prepared for more such interviews as this one, but he'd be on his guard now. His jaw set grimly.

As he opened the door to his apartment Stephen heard music. He remembered now—Hester had told him that Mary Trencher, the young woman with whom she was studying violin, was coming this afternoon. He stood for a moment in the hall, irresolute, half-minded to go out again. No . . . he wasn't going to walk the streets any more. He'd been doing that, it seemed to him, most of the time since he had got home. He couldn't even get to the bedroom without crossing the living room.

Methodically he hung his coat in the closet, laid his hat on the hall table, stood for a moment looking in at the living-room door. A stranger was seated, her back to him. Hester stood facing him, her head bent over her violin. Her black hair, touched with grey, which she had had cut since her return home, had escaped from its usual neat arrangement, and fell about her face in a soft mass, shadowing her eyes.

"I haven't got it yet." Hester stopped, studying the score before her.

"No. But it's more nearly right than you've done it so far."

"Isn't this it?" Hester's bow touched the strings.

Stephen was not musical. Only once had Hester's music ever revealed her to him. That had been just after the death of their first baby, and he had come around the corner of the house and heard her jagged, uncertain playing. It had broken his heart then. He had never heard her play since, he suddenly realized, until today.

Now, as he stood unseen, watching her, he realized that Hester was a good workman. The precision, the concentration that he admired in a job of skill, he saw Hester had. Things she had spoken of in her letters began to have significance for him. He had thought until now of her taking up music again as a means of entertainment. Now, slowly forming in his mind was the knowledge of struggle that she had been passing through. He had some realization of the effort that must have lain between those two performances of hers.

Hester lifted her eyes, saw him. "Stephen!" she cried, hastily laying down the violin and coming toward him. "I didn't know you were home."

Mary occupied herself sorting out music, waiting for their greetings to be over. She heard Hester's low question, a little aside, "Did you see Georges?" and Stephen's non-committal reply. "Yes. There wasn't anything there."

To Mary, five years of living in New York gave that question and answer their full meaning. How many times had she

been asked it, had asked it of others, had heard or made the careful, non-committal reply, "There wasn't anything."

"Why, he's job hunting!" she thought. She had taken it for granted that the oil company for whom he worked had brought him home to a position in New York after his long service abroad. What had gone wrong? Hester's life had seemed to her almost too secure.

"Mary, this is Stephen," said Hester as they crossed the room. "And Stephen, Mary Trencher."

So this was Hester's Stephen. Mary had often wondered what he would be like. Hester had told her simply that he was a business man, and she had expected to see someone shrewd and a little hard. Business, as Mary had watched it in this city, left such marks. The man she faced was of average height, his hair clipped very short, a little grey, brushed back from the temples. He was clean-shaven. His brown eyes were keen, his gaze steady but not hard, and his mouth looked strong and good. There was about him an air of quiet self-possession, as if he were ready to take the world as he found it.

He doesn't look like a failure, Mary thought. In her crowd, a man over forty who was out of a job was considered so.

He held out his hand. "Hester has spoken of you often in her letters," he said. "I want to thank you. I can see you've been a comfort to her while she's been alone."

"Thanks," said Mary. Comfort! she thought. That's a funny word. Hardly that. She remembered her first meeting with Hester. But she liked it that he did not regard her in a purely business way, as someone paid to give his wife music lessons. He was more interested in the human relation. He recognized that there was friendship between Hester and herself.

They talked for a few moments. Then Mary rose. "The hour's nearly up. Would you mind, Hester," she asked, "if we cut it a little short today? We've got a whole new pro-

gram on, and there's an extra rehearsal this evening. I said I'd come early."

"Why, no," said Hester.

There, Mary said to herself, quietly slipping out the door. I did manage to leave them by themselves. I know how a man like that would feel after job hunting.

Hester crossed the room, laying her hand in Stephen's outstretched one.

"There wasn't anything in it," he said casually, then was silent.

What was he thinking? Hester wished he would tell her, but again she thought, I mustn't crowd him.

"I liked your playing," Stephen went on. "Of course I don't know much about it, but it seemed to me you were doing a good job."

Hester flushed. Praise from Stephen was a rare and valued thing. "Better than at first, but not too good," she answered him.

"I like Mary Trencher, too. She's a help, I imagine."

"Yes," said Hester. Perhaps, after all, she thought, he hadn't counted much on this interview. A man like Stephen wouldn't be discouraged if he didn't get the first job he applied for.

Stephen picked up his paper. Behind it, he did his thinking. If the rest of Doogan's letters proved no more valuable than this one, he saw nothing to do but keep a stiff upper lip and wait for Jo Tuttle. Tuttle's plans had been changed, so the office girl told him. He had sent word that business would keep him in Europe until fall. Stephen could get along until then without making any changes in the way they were living.

Bit by bit the pattern of Hester's life was shaping itself before him. It had taken courage and determination and intelligence to create this ordered way she was living. He had been afraid sometimes that he would find her wholly absorbed in Timothy. She had waited so long for a child. It

wasn't so. It was a balanced household which Hester had established.

I mustn't destroy what she's built up, he thought. But he saw more clearly now than he had on that first day that it all had to be computed in terms of income . . . that goods and services went to this fulfillment Hester had made for all three of them. The sunny apartment—Tim needed that—the leisure that Anna gave Hester. The lessons she was taking from Mary Trencher couldn't be cheap. To stop them, though, might topple the structure Hester had so carefully wrought.

Her friend Vera Lichens he felt would think so. Vera had dropped in last evening. She had talked to him politely enough about China and his trip home, but he couldn't help feeling that her real interest was in Hester's music, and whether his coming home would put an end to it. It both amused and nettled him to realize that Vera considered him in any way a threat to Hester.

A man as he grew older, once having established an economic pattern, established economic responsibilities which could not be abandoned without disaster to others. He was conscious of his larger responsibilities—not only to Hester, but to Anna and Mary Trencher. They, too, were involved in his rise or fall.

18

ONE by one Stephen used his five remaining letters of introduction. The men who saw him, all prominent in their organizations, went through the formality of interviewing him, Stephen reasoned, as a favor to Doogan. They asked him the routine questions and politely or indifferently regretted that they had no openings "just now." Either the letters didn't mean anything, or for a man to be out of a job meant failure, and no one wanted to take a chance with him. The

irony of Stephen's situation seemed to be that a man had prestige enough to get a job only if he had one already.

April passed into May. Stephen was scarcely conscious of the changing season . . . like a good New Yorker, so absorbed in his own individual affairs that he did not notice the weather unless it caused him inconvenience. Spring did not penetrate the stone-lined corridors of the streets. Summer would.

Hester watched Stephen return from each interview a little quieter, start out for the next a little less sure of himself. She felt unemployment crystallizing around him, felt somehow that she must shatter it, but she was powerless to move. The things she could do to help would also remind him of his failure.

They were living too expensively, she felt, rapidly narrowing their margin—whatever it might be. Stephen had not told her how much he had saved, and she did not ask, realizing that some masculine caution which meant safety to him lay in keeping that knowledge to himself. Ought she to let Anna go? She might discourage Stephen by doing so, make him think that she distrusted his ability. There was money going out to Mary Trencher. That, to Stephen, would probably seem the most unnecessary, but Mary needed the money, too. She felt they ought to move into a cheaper apartment. The lease on this one would be up the first of June. And yet she feared to disturb their surface display of prosperity, not knowing how it would affect Stephen.

Stephen's final letter was addressed to the chairman of a cold storage company which handled furs. As it was a small company compared with the big corporations whose executives Stephen had been seeing, he had kept this letter till the last. The chairman gave him an unusually long interview, asking a great many questions to supplement the written record of experience Stephen had prepared.

"Well," he said at length, "suppose we get down to business. I don't know whether what we have here will interest you or not. We need a job of reorganization done. Our

system's too slack. Would you care to come in temporarily and tighten up the loose places for us? Looks as if you'd had experience in that sort of thing."

"Why, yes," said Stephen. "Anything in my line interests me, Mr. Bremer. I'd like to look over your plant, of course, first."

He was more than a little disappointed that there was nothing permanent here, but even a temporary job might give him valuable new contacts and the prestige he was seeking.

"I've been authorized," went on Bremer, "to get hold of someone at once, without going back to the other directors for confirmation. We're in a hurry because our busy season's starting, and if we're going to do anything, we've got to do it right away. I'd like to take you down to see the works this morning, and I'd like to have you begin at once, if you decide you want the job."

Bremer's car turned into the short street where the storage building stood. Stephen saw that the street was congested with trucks parked on both sides.

"We've got to tighten up on our truck drivers," the chairman said. "Of course there's always danger of holdups, so the drivers have to go armed, two to a truck. They know how valuable they are to us, for it isn't everyone who can get a pistol permit, and they're taking advantage of it. They're careless about parking when they go out to collect furs—don't seem to care how many tickets they get. It counts up."

"How about the parking on this street?" asked Stephen.

"That's still something else," Bremer answered. He did not explain what the something else might be. "Hey, Mack!" he called out. "Pull up a little, will you?"

A truck driver just about to climb down from his high cab lifted his hand in response.

Ticklish job to change the habits of a lad like that, was Stephen's conclusion, as he noticed the driver's belligerent jaw.

"We'll go in the office and meet the manager first," said

Bremer. "Even I have to get his permission to go through the plant."

A tall, lanky young man rose from a desk as they came in.

"Chesterton," said Bremer, "this is Mr. Chase, the expert in management we've been talking of getting in here for a check-up."

Chesterton meagerly acknowledged the introduction. He was very young, Stephen saw, hardly more than a boy.

As inaccessible as the vaults of a bank, the vaults where the furs were kept. Chesterton, punching a time clock, as everyone entering them was required to do, led Stephen and Bremer first into the receiving room, where the furs were unloaded from the trucks. On these first warm days of May, coats were coming in rapidly, checked in by the truck drivers at the great receiving table in the center of the room, where men worked in twos, one examining, another recording descriptions—the kind of fur, type of coat, the value. In the vast, windowless room was a constant murmur of money values. "Two hundred dollars . . . Hudson seal, sleeve lining torn. Five thousand dollars . . . mink, grease spot on back."

This year the city had gone mad over furs. Every man down to the bootblack was gambling in the stock market . . . a great bull market open at last to the little man. Overnight any man might make his fortune. Wives, daughters, sweethearts bought fur coats. Even the poor bought furs, on instalment. Those fabulously rich bought furs, those suddenly rich bought furs—the age-old mark of wealth and rank.

"There's that coat we had the row over," said Chesterton, suddenly breaking his silence. He glanced sideways at Bremer.

"I see it," said Bremer. "For God's sake, keep your eye on it." He turned to Stephen. "It's worth ten thousand. Last fall we couldn't find a record of it anywhere. Although we store it free as a personal favor, there'd have been hell to pay if we'd lost it. The man behind it brings us a lot of business—furs from the big department stores uptown." Bremer winked at Stephen. "It isn't his wife's coat. Stores it in his own name,

you understand. He's smart. Nobody's going to fleece him of that much money. You better be careful how you mislay it this year, Ches."

"Aren't you relieving me of that responsibility?" asked Chesterton.

Stephen saw there was enmity between these two men. Have to remember that, he said to himself.

From the piles of furs, cheap and expensive, rabbit, skunk, mink, Persian lamb, sable, came the faint odor of dead animals, which, Stephen was to learn, was never quite absent from furs in the mass, mingled with the stale scents of a hundred perfumes and innumerable orchids and gardenias which had left behind their dying fragrance.

"What's your system?" asked Stephen, turning to Chesterton.

"Card index, naturally," said Chesterton curtly. "But, you understand, we store sixty thousand coats on three floors in these vaults. If one coat in hundreds of racks gets misplaced—through the carelessness of some worker—when we come to pull the coats in the fall, we're in trouble. It's not so simple as it looks. If the men are pressed for time, and they are, we're understaffed, they make mistakes. And they make mistakes when they put them in, too, if they're tired or in a hurry."

Chesterton, Stephen saw, was aiming his explanation actually at Bremer. There was a note of bitter resentment in the young manager's voice.

Evidently feels it puts him in kind of a face-losing position, Stephen thought, my coming in on him like this.

Still, it was often done in business. The Oil Company had sent efficiency experts around every once in a while. He had to own to himself, though, that sometimes he had thought them a good deal of a nuisance. But there was no need for resentment unless a man had something to cover up.

As they went back through the vaults, Bremer took Stephen aside. "Well? Think you want to do it?"

"Yes," said Stephen. "I'll work out something for you." He believed he knew the kind of check needed to eliminate the human element of the tired worker.

"Good," said Bremer. "I'll be going then. If you'd like, you can finish out the afternoon."

At five o'clock Stephen went home, a half-day's work, his first in this city, an accomplished fact. Already some center of activity in his brain, clogged from disuse, was again running free.

"Hester," he called as the door opened to his latchkey. "I'm working."

"I knew it wouldn't take you long." She hurried to meet him.

"It's only temporary," he cautioned her.

"What of it? All you needed was an opening, Stephen." Stephen should never know that his uncertainty of employment had been like a contagious blight, settling over her, too.

And the two of them, looking into each other's eyes, made tacit agreement that they'd hedge this month of employment off from anxiety, make the semblance of security into security.

19

AT FIRST Stephen's whole attention was absorbed in how to check in, without mistake, the thousands of furs pouring into the vaults. A high peak of business this year—seventy thousand, eighty thousand garments. The vaults were crowded to capacity. The last coats to come were the most fragile, pliant as silk, unbelievably expensive, worn entirely for display this late in the season. But at last the vaults were closed, each fur, ticketed, hanging under its own number, solid phalanx upon solid phalanx.

In those hurried, frantic weeks, Stephen realized, the lanky Ichabod of a manager with the fancy name of Chesterton didn't break any records helping him. He was always polite,

even suave, but Stephen, trained in the way of a race of men who were past masters in polite evasion, recognized his tactics now as he turned his attention to the office.

There were many things Stephen needed to know. Why were police uniforms stored without cards recording them? Should he do anything about it? Why did the great fur trucks blocking the streets around the plant receive no tickets? It would look as if there were some connection between the two. Did local political bosses control the plant through their favors, and if so, was it Chesterton's policy or the directors'?

To finish up his job, Stephen needed to know things which only Chesterton could tell him, but Chesterton met all his questions with an air of bland misunderstanding. Stephen was getting nettled with the fellow. Didn't he realize he could recommend that the directors look for a new manager? There may be something I haven't got hold of that's making him act as he is, he thought.

Now that he was spending most of his time in the office, Stephen began to pick up odds and ends of information that led him to believe there was some division of opinion among the directors and that it involved Chesterton. He overheard occasional remarks by furriers coming in to settle their accounts. "How's the battle going, Ches?" "We're betting on you."

He believed he might find out more if he went to the furriers' shops, on the obvious business of straightening out old accounts for the firm. Some of them were stockholders. Perhaps someone might feel it to his advantage to tell the story. He tried two or three whom he knew to be directors, got nowhere, decided to see some of the little men who had no stake in the firm. A man named Einstein had a small, but very prosperous, business downtown. The firm had had his account for years. He'd try him.

It was just noon when he and Hester reached the fur district. He hadn't intended to be so late, but he had wanted Hester to see this part of the city and she had had another

engagement. Hand carts, with furs strung on rods, were being shoved in and out of traffic. Men were pouring out of the buildings. It was difficult to push their way through.

"The workers are coming down from the lofts," said Stephen. "It's like China, isn't it?"

Hester could see why. The man-thronged sidewalks, the sense of congested life, the warm, humid air. There was here a resemblance to the dark, old streets of China, with their crowded life spilling out on to the street. Pull in the two walls of this street and you'd have it—the same marks of poverty, the same spent look in the men's faces. The air here, too, hardly seemed air, so laden was it with odors never quite blown away. The men's shirts were wet against their bodies. Little scraps of fur clung to their moist skins.

"This is the shop," said Stephen, as he guided her through a doorway.

Hester sat in a dingy outer office, waiting for Stephen and Einstein to transact their business. Odors here, too, separate and distinct, though, the strongest that of dead animals. The exhaust gas from motor cars came in through the open windows. The cheap varnish of the office furniture gave off a smell of its own.

A young woman entered, carrying a carefully tied bundle. "Hello, Einney," she called through the glass partition. "Wait," Einstein answered.

She sat down, regarding Hester. After a little, she said, "You interested in furs?"

"My husband's working with the cold storage of furs, just now," said Hester. "I know nothing of them, myself."

The woman busied herself with undoing the bundle, taking out a half-dozen silver fox pelts, which she tossed casually on to Einstein's counter. Hester looked at the furs, fascinated by their beauty.

"They're unusually fine ones," said the young woman, pleased by Hester's interest. "I held them back from the February auctions, knowing Einstein would take them."

"They are lovely. Where did they come from?"

"I raised them," said the woman with pride. "I run a fox farm in Vermont."

"Really!" exclaimed Hester. "They seem so . . . wild. I thought they must come right out of the forest."

"Oh, we breed them now. What wild ones there are left wouldn't begin to supply the trade. Besides, the tame ones bring a better price because they aren't scarred. Fighting leaves marks, or if there's a period of undernourishment, it leaves a line on the fur that never comes off. We pamper 'em and protect 'em. These skins are pedigreed."

Hester reached out, running her fingers over the beautiful fur, some wonderment within her that, in two hundred years, America, so great a continent, could have been exhausted of any of its wild life.

The woman took out of her handbag some snapshots of fox cubs sitting very black against a background of white snow. "These are wild enough. The farm's fenced, of course, but they run over forty acres of woods until their pelts mature."

Hester looked at the pictures. About the foxes was the charm of all animal young, but there was a look, also, of intent distrust. They seemed secret and wild and rare, bred out of deep snow and cold and holes in the ground. "It must be hard to kill them," she said at last.

"People always say that. I don't like it myself. But then, fox farming's my business, and pelts like these are worth a hundred dollars up, depending on quality. I've got a good way . . . it doesn't hurt the fox or blemish the pelt. One of the boys I hire built an airtight box that can be connected to the exhaust of my car. We toll the fox into it with food, close it up, and all you have to do is start the engine. No, it's not a pretty business, from start to finish. Ask the fleshers . . . they're the men who clean the skins." She looked impatiently toward the inner office. Picking up the skins, she went over, opened the door. "Einey, will you keep your eye on these? I'll go and get lunch while you're busy."

"So long," she said to Hester, and went out.

Hester wondered about her. She had a strangely hard manner. Something in that hardness reminded her of Mary Trencher, although in Mary, mitigating the hardness, was an unexpected gentleness. Was hardness necessary in earning a living in this city? And Stephen . . . how about Stephen? She was beginning to feel that America wasn't all safety.

"Vell," said old Einstein to Stephen, as the door closed once more, "I hear you're going to be manager up there."

Stephen's pulse quickened. "Yes?" He resorted to the technique learned from another Oriental race. Say nothing, let the other man talk.

Einstein looked at him shrewdly. "Pretty smart. One on Chesterton." He chuckled. "They got his money, now they kick him out. Oh, not right away. They make him your assistant first."

"You mean they want to buy him out?"

Einstein answered with a shrug.

Stephen was very quiet as he and Hester left Einstein's shop. At last he had the key to Chesterton's resentment of him. He was taking Chesterton's job and Chesterton knew it. More, he thought Stephen knew it. If that's the case, said Stephen to himself, I can't expect the man to be co-operative.

Evidently the directors had intended it to be a permanent position for him, if he did a good piece of organizing. Nothing very much about the work he cared for, except the salary was extremely good. He'd made up his mind that that was all he could expect to start with.

"You look pleased with yourself, Stephen," said Hester.

"Well, a little." He smiled at her. "I'll tell you later." Caution made him hold back from telling her now. After all, the directors hadn't confirmed anything. "Look, here comes your bus, Hester. I need to get back to the office." He waved to her as the bus pulled away from the curb.

Thinking the matter over as he sat in the subway on his ride uptown, Stephen's satisfaction left him. Chesterton's

situation wasn't so different from what his own had been with the Oil Company. He couldn't help having a biting knowledge of how the man felt—he was smarting under the injustice, and, Stephen concluded, he had a right to be. Chesterton hadn't failed in his work. Stephen had found nothing in this reorganization that proved Chesterton could not handle the business efficiently once a thoroughly workable system were put in. Such a system was usually established in a business by an outside expert. To give that expert the job before the manager had had a chance to prove himself was pretty raw.

Just what is the idea of putting me in there? thought Stephen. If I take the job, won't I, sooner or later, be asked to invest money in the firm? They're playing me for a sucker, probably, just as they did Chesterton. Indications in the office are that they're short of capital.

Suddenly, Stephen made up his mind. I wouldn't touch it with a ten-foot pole.

Late that afternoon, Stephen sat at the desk which had been temporarily installed for him in Chesterton's office. The day's rush was over. The typewriters on the stenographers' desks were hooded in their black covers. The scrubwomen would be in soon to clean up.

He had asked Chesterton for some accounts, had arranged for him to stay overtime to give them to him. Chesterton courteously complied, dug out of the files the statistics. They were valueless unless he gave Stephen their true significance.

Stephen tossed the papers on his desk, swung around in his chair. "These papers don't tell me a damn' thing. Another three weeks, with your help, ought to see us finished. What's the idea in holding back on me?"

"It's all there," said Chesterton. "Dig it out."

Stephen's keen eyes searched Chesterton's veiled ones. "I don't want your job, Chesterton."

"Oh, no?" said Chesterton with a cynical smile. "How do I know you don't?"

"Well," said Stephen, "I don't happen to want to invest any money here, and that goes with the job, doesn't it?"

"I'll be damned!" said Chesterton. "I wish I'd been that smart."

So I was right, thought Stephen. He said nothing.

"When I inherited Dad's money, I put it all in here with the understanding that I was to manage the place. Bremer's made it pretty plain that I'm on the way out. Same sort of thing happened to the fellow before me. I don't mind telling you I've been blocking you. I don't intend to let them get the job away from me if I can help it," said Chesterton.

"Exactly," said Stephen. "Now if you're convinced that I don't want it, suppose we get down to business."

Chesterton sat down. "Ask me what you want to know."

His explanation was lucid and thorough. He had at his fingertips all the intricate strands of privilege and favors given and received in order to make money for the firm. "That's the picture," he finished. "If I had it to do over, I wouldn't put a cent into this rotten business. But I'm stuck now, and they don't get me out without a scrap."

"I gave my full report to Bremer this morning," Stephen told him, three weeks later, "and in it is my recommendation that they keep you on. My guess would be that you're safe until they find someone else who'll bring them capital."

Chesterton looked at him curiously. "Mind telling me—did Bremer offer you the managership?"

"Yes," said Stephen.

That evening as Hester and Stephen sat at dinner, the telephone rang. Even with Hester's year in New York and Stephen's homecoming, the telephone was not a very frequent interruption.

"I'd better answer it." Stephen laid down his napkin, got up, not waiting for Anna.

"Hello, Steve," said the voice at the other end of the wire. "This is Jim Doogan."

"Oh, hello, Jim."

"Say, Steve. Bremer called me a while ago. Says you did a fine job for them down there."

"Glad they liked it," said Stephen.

"Liked it so much they thought you were just the man they've been looking for. But Bremer tells me that when they offered you the managership, you turned them down. Is that right?"

"Guess that's about it," said Stephen.

"What's the big idea, Steve? Thought you were looking for a good position in the city."

"I am. But that one doesn't seem to be quite in my line."

"How's that?"

"I understand that the last two managers have invested money in the business. I don't see my way to do that."

"Did Bremer ask you?"

"Not today."

There was a pause. Stephen waited.

"Aren't you rather jumping to conclusions, Steve?"

"Perhaps. But I think not."

"Of course, in a way, it's none of my business," Doogan went on, "but why not invest? It's a good outfit."

"I haven't the money available for it right now, Doogan."

"Well . . . of course, if that's the case . . ."

Stephen felt that Doogan didn't believe him. His next words confirmed it.

"I'd think it over, Steve, if I were you. As I see it from my angle, you're a little behind the eight-ball, coming home like this after twenty years away. You'd almost have to count on some sort of investment, I'd say, to get yourself started. I was under the impression you'd be willing to."

"It wasn't my intention to convey any such idea," said Stephen quietly.

"Oh, that's all right, that's all right, Steve. I know you didn't mean to let me down. I'm not trying to urge you to do anything you don't want to."

Any irritation Doogan had felt was gone now, Stephen was thinking.

"I just wanted to get the thing straight, so I could put myself right with Bremer. You see, I recommended you."

"I'm sorry if I got you in wrong, Jim," said Stephen, "but I'm afraid my decision'll have to stand. Don't think I don't appreciate all the trouble you've taken. It's been awfully decent of you."

"Oh, that's all right . . . don't give it another thought." Doogan was very affable. "Well, so long, Steve. If anything else comes my way, I'll let you know."

"Thanks."

"Who was it?" asked Hester as Stephen came back to the table.

"Jim Doogan."

"He seemed to have a lot to say," said Hester tentatively.

Stephen laughed. "He did. You know, Hester, I figure Doogan's got an interest in that fur storage business. He was trying to get me to invest in it. He evidently thinks I've got money."

"Oh," said Hester.

Stephen told her the curious set of circumstances that had led him to refuse the managership. "And this call of Doogan's tonight explains a lot," he finished. "I rather think those other letters of introduction were blinds . . . probably why I didn't have better luck with them."

"I'm so glad you didn't accept it, Stephen." Looking at him, Hester was aware again of how he stood as a bulwark between her and insecurity. "You make me feel so safe."

"So?" said Stephen, with pleasure.

AUGUST. The heat mounted in the city. Stephen began to feel stranded. Living abroad as he had so long, his ties both

of blood and friendship had loosened . . . his only contacts Doogan, who seemed to have been exploiting him, and Jo Tuttle, off in Europe. In the last weeks, he had put advertisements in both of the big morning newspapers. He had had one answer. The firm gave him an interview. They had told him to come back. Then, when he went, the secretary at the desk explained that they had decided they needed a younger man. He was beginning to hate these efficient secretaries.

Stephen had gone directly home. The apartment was empty. It was Anna's afternoon off. Hester was not expecting him back so early and was out giving Tim his daily airing. He wished they were at home.

Slowly the afternoon passed. The apartment seemed unbearably small and very hot. From the window he looked into waves of bright heat given off by the vertical walls of the building. The sun shone in horizontal rays on the window-panes across the street, making them intolerably bright mirrors of heat and light. A gust of dry wind ran along the high roofs, driving up spirals of dust, sucking them down the caverns between. In the street below, people moved, too far away to have any meaning as human beings. Their clothes, caught by the sudden wind, had the grotesque quality of clothes blowing on a line. The motor cars moved in set blocks, monotonously, as the lights changed.

How could he hope to find a place in this city? His separate personality seemed so inconsequential, robbed of the larger person of the Company, which for twenty years of service had cloaked his identity. They had made him a part of a machine which was no good without the whole. He was finished. There was no use trying.

He went into the kitchen, got himself a drink of cold water.

"Hello," he called out, as Hester came in, with Tim in his go-cart. He went forward to take her bundles.

"Oh, Stephen! I didn't expect you so early. Did you . . . did they . . . ?"

"They didn't keep me long," Stephen said. "I didn't get it."

Their hands met over the top of the bundles. A slight convulsive twitch of Stephen's fingers as they touched hers belied his casual tone. Hester felt as if her heart were swelling to enormous size. "It's only, dear, because you've not had experience here in America. It puts you at a disadvantage," she managed to say.

"I don't think that's all. It does stack the cards a bit. But—" He hesitated. "It's really because I'm over forty. Forty's the deadline."

Hester looked at him. Stephen wasn't old. Mature, yes, but not old. "That's not so! It would be waste—hideous waste—to discard a man like you, Stephen."

"I guess you're the only one who thinks so." But he felt her faith steadying him. His shoulders straightened. He was a good worker. There was no better training in efficiency than had been given him by the Company. He set his teeth a little more doggedly over the stem of his pipe.

The night seemed hotter than the day had been. Tim moved restlessly in his sleep. Again and again Stephen went in to give him a drink of water. As the evening advanced, a feeling of being lost took possession first of Hester, then of Stephen. Their conception of their own country and of New York, its most prosperous city, as a place of opportunity they had put to the test and had seen fail. America was prosperous, just as they had been told, but there wasn't opportunity for everyone. Prosperity, with its hard core unsoftened by defeat, made no allowances. Only success was acceptable to it.

Stephen walked restlessly about the apartment. "Let's take Tim over to the park," he said. "I can't breathe here." He ran his finger under the edge of his collar.

"Tim'll topple right over in his cart," said Hester, "he's so sleepy."

"I'll carry him."

Silently they went down the hall, waited for the elevator.

"Pretty hot night for the little feller," said the thin old

man who ran the car, breaking his usual deferential silence. Something in the weather's ruthless assault on the city seemed to draw people together, tonight. The man's voiced understanding made Hester and Stephen feel less isolated, and so did the laughter and voices around them as they walked down the street. Timothy lay warm and moist against Stephen's shoulder. One hand dangled limp. Hester took it, adjusting her step to Stephen's.

They climbed to the top deck of the bus. It was cool up there under the stars.

The park had every bench full. At last Stephen found a quiet corner. They sat down side by side on the grass, laying Tim across their two laps. The city's lights that on Hester's arrival home had spelled security to her, hemmed them in in shining walls. Never in all their years together had they seemed so alone or so precious to each other.

From high above them came a drone of motors as a plane went over, one green light showing sharply against the clear sky. Along the rows of benches, people lifted their heads, watching the airplane, a slim beautiful sheath for a man flying above the city's heat.

21

EVERY place that evening that gave promise of a little comfort was crowded—theaters, movies, speakeasies. At Botti's, the customers seemed never to be satisfied. They called for extra after extra from the orchestra. The tension in the heat excited them.

At last Mary Trencher was through, changed into street clothes, stood outside looking for Jim Sawyer. He had promised to meet her. The heat thrown off from concrete walls and sidewalks, the heat from the engines of trucks and motor cars sucked up the natural coolness of night. Fumes blanketed the city. For a moment Mary remembered the air as it came

over the cornfields of Iowa on a summer night. She looked up and down the street. He'll be along soon, she thought.

As she waited, she fell into a half-reverie. What she was seeing at the Chases' these days plagued her mind, both baffling and fascinating her. She had no explanation for it. Mary knew what being out of a job meant in her own crowd—pulling in your belt and hunting. She knew Stephen had found nothing. Sometimes she could hear him moving about in the other room, taking care of Tim. But there was no tightening of the belt. Anna came to the door as usual. Mary had thought in the beginning that Hester might give up her lessons, but now and then Stephen would come in at the end of an hour, ask how they were getting on, stress in little remarks he dropped his interest in the continuance of their work together. At first she had thought they must have money put away. He only wants a job to keep him busy, was her conclusion.

And then, as the weeks went by, she felt this wasn't so, that both of them were a little frightened. There *were* small economies to be seen. Hester avoided buying music scores. She no longer brought home flowers for the apartment. Stephen had cut down on his smoking. Sometimes when he came into the room, as if not thinking, he would take out a cigar from the box on the table, then put it back. But as, in general, things went on as before, Mary began to realize that they were trying to preserve something very precious to them, something they had worked hard to create.

"Hello," said Jim, at her elbow. "Walked around the block. Thought you'd never get through."

"Hello, Jim."

They had not seen each other for months. If it had not been for this party of Lennie's and Jerry's, they might have gone on like this for a year, each so pressed with work, half the city lying between the law firm, Jim's rented room, and Botti's night club, Mary's near-by apartment. Casually they picked up where they had left off.

"How are things going, Jim?"

"Well enough. Hot. Let's take the bus. The subway'll be awful."

"It'll take longer," said Mary.

"Who cares? If I know our Lennie, the party'll go on for hours. When did he and Jerry get married?" he asked, as they started to walk crosstown to the bus.

"Last week end. This is the wedding party, you know. Wait till you see their layout. There's some kind of radical meeting-hall and tenements in back, but it's the whole first floor of a house and done over very fancy."

"I'll bet it's something," said Jim. "Lennie's in the money, I take it."

"Right. Stock market. Made a killing in copper."

"Got the apartment on your hands?"

"Well, Jerry offered to pay, but you know how it is. It's not for long."

The moon was above them. The bus, almost empty, rocked and tipped its way downtown. In the clear moonlight, Jim's face looked sharply thinned, the bones making its structure rather than the flesh.

"What've you been doing to yourself, Jim? You look thin."

"It's been hot."

"How many hours are you putting in up there?"

"Averages twelve. Sometimes sixteen."

"Oh, no, Jim! In this heat!"

"It's the price you pay for the prestige at Wollkarts'. I've got a small raise out of it, so far, and a cubbyhole of my own. Summer won't last forever."

"Sometimes it seems as if it would."

"You've been putting in some hours yourself," he said, turning to look at her. "Still giving those lessons? How's Mrs. Chase?"

"Her husband's come home from China. He's out of a job."

"Too bad."

"Why do you say it like that?"

"Well, he can't be a young man. No need to bristle, Mary. But evidently he's not too good at his job."

"Just because he's out doesn't mean anything." Mary was all ready to take on a fight for Stephen.

"Oh, all right, all right. I only meant that things don't go sour on a fellow at his age, unless somehow or other he lets them. You've got to keep on your toes. But don't let's fight about him, Mary." For a moment he was silent, watching the street lamps go past, then, as the bus slowed and stopped for a red light, he turned to her, a tense note in his voice. "Listen, Mary. How about us?"

Mary choked a little. "It's no good, Jim. Law and music wouldn't mix." She spoke with some effort at lightness, shocked at how sharply some instinct within her drew back from marriage. It wasn't so hard to refuse Jim tonight. There had been times when he had made love to her with a passionate urgency. He was too tired now to make more than this simple offer. Overwork, she reflected, brought its own asceticism.

"Let's leave it for a while longer, then. For you to think over."

"That wouldn't help. I . . . couldn't. . . ."

"That's that. Forget it, Mary."

Mary tried to say more, stopped. She could never make him understand that to a woman like herself marriage seemed a dual allegiance. There was a kind of integrity that demanded she keep her music beyond any chance of loss. Even yet, what Hester had lost in technique shocked Mary. And, too, work as hard as she might, Hester could not give complete devotion to music. Since her husband's return, her work had lost something. If he were in the house when she was playing, Mary with her keen sense of what music demanded, could not help but detect that other demand laid upon Hester.

If I should ever care like that for a man . . . Mary had a feeling of fright.

They walked along an areaway between two brick houses. The moon stood directly over the narrow back yards. The fence bordering the alley looked grey and old, silvery in the moonlight. A tree-of-heaven spread the pattern of its frond-like leaves on the concrete. The shine struck the gilt tubing of a lamp standard in Lennie's courtyard and glistened on a shower of drops falling from the hose nozzle fastened to it.

"My Lord!" said Jim with awe. "He's even got a fountain!"

"What kept you?" asked Jerry. "Come along in and see our diggings." She was elaborately off-hand, didn't want Mary to suspect her triumph.

The rooms had been done over to give this old Victorian mansion its original look. Lennie and Jerry had furnished their floor with the newest models. Overstuffed chairs flanked the fireplace. The living room was full of people, most of whom Mary did not know.

"Some of Lennie's Wall Street friends?" asked Jim.

The irony was lost upon Jerry. "Uh-huh," she said with some satisfaction. "Come along and get into a bathing suit, Mary. It's cool out in the court."

As Mary stood under the hose, the water on her hot skin felt fresh and cold. The rush of it on her rubber cap hushed the sound of the late traffic, the racket of the voices around her. She liked the clean smell of the wet concrete.

Dressed again, Mary stretched herself out in a long chair, one of a half-dozen arranged against the back fence of the courtyard, seeing the moon and the tall buildings with the skeleton stairways of fire escapes zigzagging their sides. Milk bottles, vegetables, men and women sprawled out asleep were touched by moonlight. From the back windows of the meeting hall near by came a burst of clapping, followed by singing, vociferous and raucous.

*"Arise, ye prisoners of starvation,
Arise, ye wretched of the earth."*

"Hello, Mary." Lennie came along. He was perfect in this role of host, circulating among his guests, bringing drinks, seeing that everybody had a good time. "You'd think that outfit over there would get tired. Or, at least, hot." Suddenly he threw back his head and caught up the chorus of the song in his fine baritone, filling the melody with a pathos that sentimentalized the bitter words. "See?" he said, grinning comfortably at Mary. "That's the way it should be sung."

"You should know," said Jim.

"Oh, snap out of it, Jim! This is a celebration, don't you know it?"

"Congratulations," said Jim.

"If you had the sense of a boiled owl, you'd cut yourself a piece of this cake and get yours while it's going, the way I am. You used to be fit to ask to a party." Lennie stalked off irritably.

"Damn his soul!" said Jim under his breath. The finality of Mary's refusal had tipped the scales of his weariness into bitterness. He dropped into the chair beside her.

The moon was hidden by the tenement which rose, a square black plane except for one lighted window blocked by a screaming radio. Laughter and jazz came from within Lennie's rooms.

"What are we after?" said Jim suddenly. "We've come from all over the country. Nine out of ten of us are living on our folks . . . little, drab men and women back in Maine, Iowa, Kansas, the Panhandle, with maybe a store or a farm, sending out five dollars here and a sawbuck there. It looks like waste to me."

"You know the small towns can't take care of their own. The farms can't, either. There's everything to get here in New York."

"If you can get it."

Mary, tired too, braced herself against the contagion of Jim's bitterness. She leaned across, put her hand over his. "Don't be bitter, Jim."

SEPTEMBER had given its final burst of heat before Jo Tuttle returned to the city. The first day in the office he called Stephen. "It's great to have you back, Steve. How are you? Are you tied up with anything yet? Can you come around in the morning?" It was a friendly voice, taking it for granted that Stephen might not have found anything so soon.

"Awfully glad to see you, Steve," said Tuttle, when Stephen came in. "The office here didn't let me know you were back, or I'd have written you from abroad. But Tom said you didn't seem in any particular hurry to get placed—thought you were planning for a summer's vacation—so he just made a note of your address and telephone number. We meant to see more of your wife before we went away, but you know how it is in the city. Things pile up on you."

Stephen looked at his friend. Except that he was older than when he had seen him last, stouter, too, he seemed to be just the same old Jo, not putting on any airs with all the new office grandeur. He was a very rich man now, Stephen had learned from Doogan, but he made no effort to display the fact. There was perhaps just a little added assurance about him, the natural satisfaction in success.

"What'd you think of America, Steve? Pretty fine, eh?"

"Yes," said Stephen. "Whatever happens, I'll be glad I came home."

"Bad out there?"

"Pretty bad. All the big businesses contracting."

"I guess you'd have found it easier if you'd come home before that happened," said Jo.

"You mean that's affected things here?" said Stephen.

"How many men, say in your own company and others in the Far East, d'you suppose have resigned this last year, or have got fired and want to get jobs here at home?" Jo countered.

"Oh, I'd say fifty or so."

"Weren't most of them booked for the higher executive jobs, if American business hadn't got a setback out there?"

"Yes," said Stephen. "But surely America with her resources can absorb as few men as that."

"If you come down to brass tacks, Steve, how many men are needed at the top, even here in America?" And then, not waiting for Stephen's answer, Tuttle went on. "Things have been moving fast in the U.S.A. We aren't any longer the country of limitless opportunity we've all talked about. A man hasn't got the chance for an individual start that he once had here. Just lately, for instance, two or three big companies have had mergers, and each merger cuts down the number of high executives needed. The country's reaching its maturity. We're not very conscious of it yet because it's still the heyday for labor. Now, over in Europe, I saw what may be facing us."

"Is it necessary for America to go that road?" said Stephen. "The next step is in the Far East, if you want to follow the theory out logically." Stephen had answered from the top of his mind. Below, something was saying to him, was Jo trying to hedge, as Tom Breckinridge had? He looked at his old friend directly. "What are you trying to tell me, Jo? That a man like me doesn't come in anywhere?"

"Good Lord, no," said Tuttle. "As a matter of fact, I may be taking on a little extra business in which I could use you myself, Steve. It's an industrial alcohol plant out in Kansas. Know anything about the product?"

"Industrial alcohol? Yes. I know how it's used in England and Europe. They've tried it out as a blend with gas for their cars. What would be your market?"

"Medicine and perfume concerns. Understand the market's okay. Good and steady."

Stephen's hungry mind, so long denied the analysis it delighted in, went avidly after each detail Jo could tell him of the business. He knew a good deal about the various uses of

power alcohol. Europeans in China talked often about it as a substitute for gasoline in countries where oil was short.

Knows his stuff, thought Tuttle. I haven't handled men for twenty years for nothing. If I know my old friend Steve, he's the kind of a man an employer doesn't get hold of very often. He'd consider his organization first, himself second. But he's pretty badly licked just now, I'd say.

Both circumstances made their own appeal to Jo Tuttle. His business sense made him covet such loyalty; a certain paternalism in him made him want to help Steve out. Aloud he said, "Well, I'll tell you, Steve. I may have to take this plant over. Matter of a mortgage. If I do, would you be interested in going out there and handling it for me?"

"As business manager?" Stephen's face grew keen with pleasure. "Would I!"

"There're a lot of details to check on. I'm not sure yet I want the plant. It's not exactly up my alley. I'll keep you in mind though, if I take it over. Meantime, I'll look around among my friends and see if there's anything in your line here in New York."

The presentation of a problem, his mind biting into it for a moment, then having it withdrawn. How he'd like to tackle a real job like that! thought Stephen. Instead he must hold his mind in a kind of suspended state until Jo decided whether he'd have the place for him, unable to forget it, trying not to count on it.

Tuttle got up heavily from his chair. "We must see a lot of each other, Steve. How about bringing Hester around to dinner? Sometime next week," he added. "I'll let you know what day when I see what my wife's got on."

Stephen emerged from Jo's office with a restlessness that he knew no way of ending. He felt the unbearable petering out of his expectation. Seeking some place where he could be alone, he hailed a Fifth Avenue bus, climbed to its top, not realizing that he had chosen the sanctuary of New York's lovers and New York's troubled.

He felt suspicion growing in the bitter soil of his mind's uncertainties. Was Jo putting him off with a problematic managership on account of their old friendship, a little kinder in his method than Breckinridge, but putting him off, just the same? Ushering him out, just the same?

Past the big department stores, past the exclusive Fifth Avenue shops displaying hats, furs, dresses. Past the art galleries. Past blocks upon blocks of grandiose apartment houses on Riverside Drive. The Hudson River. Green parkway, children playing. The yacht basin, full of cruisers and expensive boats. The old square-rigged ship, housing an exclusive club. He had been taken on board it once by one of the directors of the Company, when he had been home on leave. The costly panorama of the city. Everything money could buy. Suddenly, savagely, he wanted things for Hester and Tim.

"Oh, Stephen, where've you been?" Hester greeted him as he came in. "I even called Jo Tuttle's office, but they said you'd gone long ago. Mr. Doogan's been trying to get you. He says it's very important."

"Doogan?"

"Yes. He wants you to 'phone the minute you get in."

"I guess he can wait till I take a shower." Damn Doogan! He wished he would leave him alone. His leads hadn't amounted to anything. "What number'd he leave?" he asked irritably, and then checked himself. Lately, he realized, he had felt a growing irritability which he sometimes showed at home. He got slowly out of the chair he had sunk into.

Hester heard him say, "Doogan?" his tone flat, non-committal. For a long time Stephen said nothing. She could hear the voice at the other end vibrating against the receiver. Then Stephen answered, his tones clipped, businesslike. "I'll be around first thing in the morning. At your office, you say?"

The man who put down the telephone and turned to her

was a new and energized Stephen. "Doogan says he's practically got me a job with one of the big mergers. Assistant manager."

"You mean really a job? Not just an interview?" Hester's tone was a little skeptical.

"Doogan says so."

They stared at each other. Then both reacted at once to the superstition as old as man—never let the vague power which controls man's luck hear you rejoice over that luck.

"You're going to be careful, aren't you, Stephen, about Doogan?"

"Yes, I am," said Stephen. "But the merger he mentioned is one that Jo Tuttle spoke of today."

A moment later Hester heard him running the shower in the bathroom, and his monotonous humming, like the bumbling of a bee—the nearest approach to music Stephen ever made.

The business was a merger of half a dozen food concerns, making a chain which was planned to extend over the whole of the United States. Francis Middleton, the general manager, Doogan told Stephen on the way up to the merger's new offices, was the brains of the company. He wanted an assistant who knew the ropes of big business methods—someone who could assume the brunt of the administrative routine, leaving him free for the larger problems.

"He'll take you, all right, Steve, if he likes you personally, and he will. I've seen to that. He thinks the Oil Company gives about the best efficiency training a man can get. Butter him up a little," he went on. "And don't let on that you want the job too much. I've given you a big build-up. A man who's asked by Jo Tuttle to come in and see him on his first day back in the office after an absence of several months . . . well, that's something."

"How on earth did you know that?" Stephen stared at him.

"Your wife said that's where you'd gone. I put two and two together," said Doogan.

"Jo and I are old friends. You know that."

"Now, look, Steve"—Doogan regarded him anxiously—"don't pull this modest stuff you're pulling with me now. Talk yourself up. If Jo's name gives you a little prestige, use it." By the way," he added, "young Chesterton seems to have got on his feet. He's doing a sweet job down there."

"Yes?" was Stephen's laconic reply. He ignored the reference to the fur business. "I'm getting on to the fact that in America, if you aren't busy, you must act as if you are."

"That's the idea," said Doogan.

Everything, Stephen realized, had been arranged. He and Doogan, without preliminaries, were ushered directly into Middleton's office. The room seemed one shining surface of new mahogany. Middleton, the very epitome of success, fitted the room. The cut of his suit gave evidence of the best tailoring. There was a flower in his buttonhole. "Hello, Doog." He held out his hand to Stephen.

Stephen found in Middleton's manner none of the suspicion he had encountered in his other interviews. Middleton asked him no probing questions. In his attitude toward Stephen's former job there was a subtle flattery. He managed to convey the idea without saying so, that Stephen must have been pretty good to hold such a position, that his organization was lucky to get such a man.

It was easily and quickly arranged that Stephen would take the assistant managership of the merger. The salary which Middleton named almost made him betray himself by the show of feeling Doogan had warned him against. It was twice what he had ever received before.

"Can you take over the first of the week?" Middleton asked.

Stephen, wishing he could begin this very moment, paused, profiting by Doogan's schooling. He demurred a little. "Let's see. This is Thursday." Yes, as an accommodation to Middleton, he'd make arrangements to begin on Monday.

As THEY started out for Jo Tuttle's dinner party, Stephen with a sense of deep satisfaction helped Hester into a taxi. In the past months they hadn't allowed themselves any such luxury.

Lighted windows, well-dressed crowds of people slipped past the taxi windows.

Their minds, released from the taut strain of uncertainty, settled naturally into old habits of thought, as cloth which has been long folded falls back into the pattern of those folds. Now that Stephen had a job, they marveled that they had doubted it would come. Their own country was, after all, the land of ample opportunity. Those who had the will were bound to make good.

Jo was waiting for them in the lobby of the hotel he had chosen for his party and came forward as they entered.

"It's just a big family celebration," he said, shaking Hester's hand. "My wife, a couple of old pals in college with Steve and me, connected with me in business now—Tom Breckinridge and his wife, and Purcell. You remember Purcell, Steve. My own kids and his. Wish your boy was big enough. It's grand having Steve back for good," he went on, guiding Hester toward his little group. "You didn't tell me that was in the wind."

"We hadn't decided then," Hester said, feeling no little surprise over Jo's last remark. After all, she hadn't seen the Tuttles enough to have more than the most casual of conversations. But Jo's cordiality warmed her. She remembered now how much she had always liked him.

Mrs. Tuttle greeted them with a nicely balanced cordiality and reserve. She was as contained as her husband was outgoing. Jo was the kind of person who would always have about him something of the rough-and-ready; Flora Tuttle was as finished as stone cut to a form. Although not beautiful,

she created the impression of being so. Her skin, massaged and treated by experts, was firm and smooth at forty-five. Her eyes, a deep blue, were clear, if a little hard. Her mouth, small and neat, was well-shaped, whether she were serious or smiling. The simple black dress she wore was cut to give her style and grace. "We thought," she said, addressing Hester, "that you would enjoy the music here."

Trading on her husband's love of a crowd, Mrs. Tuttle managed to have parties of his business friends given at hotels, thus keeping their town home for her more exclusive friends. In that way she avoided any further personal demand upon her.

Tom Breckinridge laid a friendly hand on Stephen's shoulder. "We want you to come around and see us. How about it, Steve?"

"Yes, sir," said the headwaiter. "Here's your table, sir. The one you like best, Mr. Tuttle, sir."

"Thanks, Edouard," said Tuttle, with the same ample kindness with which he had welcomed his guests.

Hester glanced about the dining room. Everything seemed curiously beautiful. She felt an old, sensuous safety returning, as she looked at the rich appointments, the well-groomed women at her own and other tables, drew in with every breath the blur of many scents from their cared-for bodies mingled with the scent of flowers, felt the soft carpet under her feet, tasted the excellent food. This we belong to, she thought. This city is home, where we are going to live.

She was seated at Jo Tuttle's right. The comfort of years of security, she thought, noticing the slightly overnourished body and a certain mild complacency. He was going through the formalities of conversation with Mrs. Breckinridge, on his left. Suddenly he turned to Hester. His look was penetrating. "You wouldn't have known my kids, would you?" Jo said, the keen evaluation in his eyes retreating behind the guards of kindness. "You haven't seen them since you and Steve visited us in the country on one of your home leaves. That's

Jo, next to Mrs. Breckinridge. And remember what a little tomboy Jane was? Look at her now." Jo chuckled.

Jane Tuttle sat halfway down the table. She must be about nineteen now, Hester made quick calculation, but the expression of her face was one of sophisticated immobility, a controlled remoteness, as if she were never touched by the emotions that mar serenity. An expression the aristocratic Chinese had cultivated for centuries, Hester thought suddenly.

On Jane's right sat a clean-cut, good-looking young man of about twenty, on her left a middle-aged man who wore the equipment of the deaf.

"They're old cronies, those three," said Tuttle, looking at them with affection. "Frank Purcell . . . you didn't meet him, I guess, before dinner. Wife's dead, and that's his son on Jane's right. Purcell's her godfather, and she thinks the boy's her sweetheart. They want to get married, but Flora—" he looked toward his wife—"thinks they're too young." A little shadow crossed Jo's face. "As a matter of fact, why shouldn't I take care of them both for a while, if it's necessary? Young Celly, that's what he's called, has got a fair job and I could supply the extras. Flora says if I don't offer them that, Jane won't consider living on what Celly makes."

Jane suddenly shook back her forelock of hair which had fallen across her forehead and smiled up at Celly. There was something in the movement reminiscent of the tomboy Jane had once been. She might not wait for her mother's consent, Hester was thinking. Then she glanced down the table at Mrs. Tuttle. She wasn't so sure. Jane already would have had impressed upon her the responsibility of money.

"Interesting about Purcell," Jo was saying. He was expansive this evening, far more so than Hester had ever seen him. "He's my head shipping man. Gets along beautifully in the shipping house, where there are all kinds of noise and commotion. In the office, where I had him first, he couldn't hear a thing even with his earphone."

His friends mean a lot to him, thought Hester. I wonder

why he didn't do anything for Stephen that day. From the way Stephen had acted after he'd come in from talking to Jo, Jo hadn't helped him.

"Steve tells me he's got himself placed," Jo went on, as if reading her thoughts.

"Why, yes, Jo," she said, "he has."

"I'd have liked to have Steve associated with me. There was a business deal coming up I hoped he'd be interested in. Naturally he told you about it." Again he looked at her closely. "But my offer would have taken him to Kansas. Didn't appeal to you, I suppose."

"Why, Jo Tuttle! I've followed Stephen to stranger places than Kansas, as you know."

Jo seemed a little taken aback.

Hester felt a touch on her shoulder, glanced up. Young Tuttle was standing by her side. "Would you like to dance?"

"Why, yes," she said, rising. "Hello, Jo. You've grown. I wouldn't have known you."

Young Jo seemed bored at this reminder of his kid days, as he gave her his arm. Hester looked at him with a little amusement. Silently they danced.

Thinking, in some bewilderment, of Jo Senior's last remark to her, she moved absent-mindedly about the dance floor. Surely Stephen would have told her if Jo had offered him anything definite. Why was Jo trying to give her the impression that he thought she had held Stephen back?

All at once she began to be aware of a curiously beautiful harmony in the movements of herself and her partner. She looked up at the tall young man, surprising pleasure in his eyes.

"I wondered if you'd notice it," he said. "This is *something* we're doing together."

He wasn't bored now. That she was a good dancer, Hester saw, gave her interest in his eyes. Dancing evidently was one of his real occupations. He danced like a professional, with easy and perfect rhythm.

"You dance beautifully," young Jo said.

"Thanks," said Hester demurely.

Under the pleasant flow of his manners and conversation, Hester began to enjoy herself tremendously. "The music's very good," she said.

"That boy knows his piano." Jo changed his step to follow a subtly altered rhythm of the music.

"Do you play, Jo?"

"Pretty good at the piano. Mother saw to it. Part of her idea of equipment," he said with a grin.

Hester contrasted him with Mary's friend Jim Sawyer. Jim, about the same age, had put her immediately in touch with the masculine world of effort. This boy did not. But he was very charming.

Jo Tuttle the elder watched his opportunity and, when most of his guests were dancing, moved over beside Stephen. "Steve," he said, "I wish you'd let me know before you committed yourself . . . given me a chance to have you with me."

"It was all very sudden," Stephen answered him. "I had to act quickly. There was a message waiting for me from Jim Doogan when I got home, the day I was at your place."

"Where'd you run on to Doogan?"

"At the college club, when I first came home."

"H'm," said Jo. He cleared his throat. "Look, this is just between us, but I'd keep my eyes open a little when it comes to Doogan."

"He seems all right to me, Jo," said Stephen. "He's gone out of his way to help me find an opening."

Something in Stephen's tone made Jo look at him curiously. So this was it, then. Steve thought he hadn't meant to take him on. Well, perhaps he hadn't made it plain that day, but he hadn't thought he needed to—that Steve would take it for granted. He should have realized that as Steve was pretty well licked, only a definite offer would mean anything to him. After a moment's hesitation, he said, "I meant what I said about that Kansas business."

"Oh, that's all right, Jo. This turned up first, that's all." Stephen spoke casually. How was he to know, now, how much of Jo's present interest in him was inspired by the prestige of his new job? Having a good job had certainly increased his value in Tom Breckinridge's eyes. Had it in Jo's?

Mrs. Tuttle motioned young Jo to seat Hester next her. As they talked, deeper and deeper in Hester grew the conviction that Mrs. Tuttle was a matriarch no less powerful than the matriarchs of China. Her mind, Hester was well aware, was not on their casual conversation, but was engrossed with an interest almost fierce in the movements of Jane and young Celly as they danced together. Conscious suddenly that the party rode on conflicting currents, Hester found the sensuous safety she had felt so strongly earlier in the evening, shaken. She looked around the table to find Stephen. He was staring straight ahead, the conversation dividing like a stream on either side of him. As on that first night after his return from China, something in the expression of his eyes, the set of his mouth, gave her a vivid impression of a Stephen she did not know.

24

ON STEPHEN'S first day at the office, Middleton took time to explain the merger. "It enables us to operate more efficiently and thus cut prices, bringing what used to be counted luxury food within the reach of the man with a small income." He was standing by the office window, where the morning light threw into relief the planes of his face.

Stephen was acutely aware that the man's expression did not give authenticity to his altruistic words. He believed he would have liked Middleton better if he had said frankly that the merger's main objective was to make more money.

I'm not kidding myself, Stephen thought. I know what *I'm* here for. Then he checked himself. Certainly he wasn't here to criticize the general manager.

He soon forgot to in his admiration of the man, seeing Middleton's orderly mind shape the chaotic parts of several businesses into one smoothly running machine. The work began coming over his own desk in an avalanche, just as he liked it to come. It healed the wound of humiliation inflicted upon him in those days when he had sat at his desk in the far-off interior post of China, idle, knowing he had been sent there because the post did not need a busy man. His self-respect, inextricably tied up with work, began to return.

He liked his office, next to Middleton's in size and richness of appointment, his own private secretary and two additional stenographers within call. A place of his own, marked by these signs of importance, in this greatest city of his own country. When his first pay check came in, the realization shot through him like an electric thrill that he could spend, if he liked, more freely than he ever had in his life before . . . spend like a rich man.

The merger, in the next weeks, grew rapidly. Across the country in town after town, its new branches opened. On the wall in Middleton's office was a big map with tiny red flags stuck into it, new ones added from day to day. Like a war map it looked, only the advance was steady—there were no retreats. Sometimes the advance was slow, sometimes rapid. It depended on how much fight the privately owned stores put up. The simplest way for everyone was for the merger to buy out the independent concerns, but if the owners stubbornly refused to sell, the merger started its own stores, with "price leaders" to pull trade their way.

Stephen handled many of these details, either by correspondence or in conference with the field staff.

Following Middleton's instructions, he explained the campaign to the field men. "It's open competition, which is wholesome and good for the country. The enterprising and efficient independents have their established trade, and they'll keep it. Only the inefficient ones will go under, and they should. It's the consumer we should think of. If he finds that

our stores save him money, he has a perfect right to that saving."

Middleton liked Stephen's work. The first of December, he saw to it that Stephen received a substantial salary raise.

Stephen took a larger apartment, in the same building, but keeping the view Hester liked so much.

As December advanced, every day in the city there were more signs of Christmas. More and more Christ Childs in Mangers appeared in store windows. Christmas trees made of glass tubes, or ostrich feathers, or of firs with their green needles sprayed in aluminum paint sprung up everywhere. In Washington Arch, the traditional green fir tree rose serene over the traffic of the Square. At busy corners, Santa Claus's red garments made spots of color, and along the rumbling streets came the clear chime of his little bells.

Stephen rarely failed to drop something into the iron kettle over which Santa Claus watched. Because, he thought, I have Tim and Hester this year.

25

MIDDLETON's buzzer sounded.

He might have hollered through the partition, Stephen grinned to himself. "Coming right in," he answered the clipped tones speaking out of the glossy voice-box.

"Steve, I think we've got to tighten up a little at the Bronx warehouse," Middleton began. It was only recently that he had begun to use Stephen's first name. "Stackpole's a little too easy-going. How about running up there and giving things the once-over? There's a question of the size of staff. I want you to see if you can cut it down. Take particular note of that, will you?"

Stephen was glad to go up to the warehouse. To watch waste disappear under his management always gave him the creator's satisfaction. The cutting down of labor by the in-

roduction of new equipment, such as traveling belts for the assembling of products, was one of the economies of the merger. Perhaps Stackpole needed a little help in the matter. Also, Stephen looked forward to contact, such as he had always been used to, with different kinds of men. So far, his work had kept him close to his desk, making his touch with men, other than the office and the field staffs, negligible.

The city was fine this morning. As he got off the subway in the Bronx, he looked with delight at the mountains of holly wreaths and the rows of green Christmas trees along the fronts of shops and in vacant lots. That was the kind of tree he wanted for Tim.

He entered the warehouse with keen interest, realizing how well he knew it from office diagrams, though he had never seen it before. Just inside the entrance was Stackpole's dusty cubicle.

"Sit down," said Stackpole, sweeping a handful of stuff from a chair to the floor. The disorder of the office was appalling to Stephen, but he saw, after he had been there a little while, that it was the disorder a certain type of very efficient person enjoyed. Bet this warehouse is order itself, was his shrewd guess. Stephen liked Stackpole. He was little and crotchety and gay.

"Do you mind if I take a look around?" asked Stephen at last.

"Okay." Stackpole grinned. "Ever since the merger the big boys have been tightening up on me. I'll be glad enough, if you can show me any holes that can be plugged."

"You were with one of the old companies, I understand," Stephen said.

"Yes. And I ran the place so they made enough money, too. No sense being hogs."

Stephen went from floor to floor. Seventy-five or more girls and women were candling eggs at a long table, lifting the eggs from the cases, scrutinizing them before candling lamps, placing them according to grade. Their hands moved with

almost incredible speed. Stackpole, he saw, might press them harder by cutting down the staff, but it would be at a considerable cost to nerves. Expensive in the long run. The same seemed true where girls were marking brands, packaging butter, wrapping bakery goods.

On the ground floor, men were unloading crates of green vegetables from freight cars backed up on a siding. There was a more casual manner here, but even so, Stephen felt, Stackpole was getting the best out of his men. The assembling of products, too, for the different stores was well handled. Stephen stopped to look at the new traveling belts.

"Layout looks pretty good to me," he told Stackpole, when they got back to the office. "It's the assembling the main office is a little edgy about. Can you tighten up there any, do you figure?"

"Those kids have got all they can handle. I could jump on their tails, but it'd be a crime," answered Stackpole curtly.

Giving his findings to Middleton, Stephen advised against any cut in staff at the warehouse, on the ground that, due to tired nerves and accidents, the extra labor turnover would in the end eat up any saving. "Incidentally, I'd say Stackpole's doing a fine job," he finished. "He's got the good will of the staff, and just now, in starting, it seems to me worth while to make an extra effort to keep it."

Middleton pulled a fresh package of cigarettes out of his pocket, with a deft movement stripped off its outer covering, tapped up the cigarettes, helped himself, tossed the package across the desk to Stephen. "The main point right now is—" he paused, holding a match to his cigarette—"we want production speeded up in that warehouse."

"Then my opinion is that you can't lay off any men," said Stephen.

Middleton took the cigarette out of his mouth, delicately spitting out a tiny fleck of tobacco. His shrewd, compact face was expressionless. "I don't think you've got quite the right angle on it, Steve. You go up and tell Stackpole to weed out

his slowest men, and let the others know that's why he fired them. The time to stress the ideals of hard work, loyalty and co-operation is right now, while the cutting down that went with the merger is fresh in their minds. Stackpole doesn't want to lose his job, either. He's too old to get in again, once he's out. Bring a little pressure to bear. You'll get loyalty enough."

"After the holidays, when the rush is over, you'd consider the best time?" asked Stephen. His own face was as expressionless as Middleton's.

"Don't pay any Christmas bonuses you don't have to. Let them know when they knock off Christmas Eve that you don't need them any longer."

Back in his office, Stephen considered Middleton's words. He was not unaware how patly they applied to himself . . . very clear in his mind those months he had searched for a job. Loyalty to the organization! Hooey! he thought. But fear bred a special loyalty of its own.

Well, I've learned my lesson. It's their jobs or mine. It isn't up to me to worry about a few clerks losing their jobs, or the rest getting jaded nerves. I couldn't save them anyway. I would only jeopardize my own job.

Middleton's manner had made it clear that he could get someone else for his assistant—someone who wouldn't be squeamish in such things.

It was easier for Stephen to persuade himself than it would have been even a few weeks ago.

26

THE December evening was bleak and windy. Mary Trencher stopped for a moment in the shelter of the subway exit, dreading a little the walk crosstown to the Chases' apartment. For Hester's dinner party she had had to ask Botti to let her off. He had refused at first, and then when she had reminded him

that in the two years she had worked for him she had not missed a single evening, and that most of the men had, he had consented, grumbling. Perhaps she shouldn't have risked his displeasure.

Mary came around the last corner, head down, braced against the wind which cut through her light coat, not really adequate even over day clothes, less so over an evening dress. She had not bought a heavy coat this winter. The apartment rent, without Jerry's share, had been a doubled expense through September, and there were, too, the last instalments on her violin. Her legs tingled and stung through her silk stockings and her fingers on the handle of her violin case felt numb. Last winter, she had hardly felt the cold, but now it seemed her body didn't warm up as it used to with its own vitality. The late nights, the long, exhausting hours of work she had put in during the past two years, were beginning to tell a little. Often to gain the strength and security she needed, she had to fill her mind with the vision of the prairie she had known all her childhood, and the unbroken sequence of its winter days.

She stopped a moment in the lobby of the apartment house to get her breath and warm herself before going up.

The Chases were giving their return party to the Tuttles, tonight. In the last weeks, Jo Tuttle had gone out of his way to be friendly with Stephen, often inviting him to his club for luncheon, introducing him to influential members. He had put up Stephen's name for membership. "Takes a couple of years to get in," he said, "so we'd better get you started. I'll see you oftener if we belong to the same club."

Jo had also dropped remarks now and then about their two families getting better acquainted. "It would be nice if Flora and Hester could get together, too. We live near enough to each other so we might be pretty sociable."

In the light of such remarks, Stephen had suggested to Hester that the dinner should be in their own apartment.

"Just the two families," he had said, "with Purcell's boy for Jane."

"I'd like to ask Mary Trencher," Hester suggested. "It will make the young couples even."

Remembering Flora Tuttle's interest in the musical world, she had also invited Vera Lichens. Vera hadn't been able to get away from the studio in time for dinner, but she had promised to drop in later.

As Hester put the last touches to the living room, moving a vase of flowers, clicking off the top lights which made the room too bright, she reflected, Just a year ago, I was worrying about Stephen's return. She hummed as she moved about.

Stephen came in. "You're very happy, aren't you, Hester?" "Do I need to tell you?" She smiled at him.

"Yes, I believe you do. At least, it seems to put a stamp of approval on what I'm doing."

"Do you need that, Stephen?" Hester waited for his answer.

"Well—there's the bell." He seemed relieved, she thought. It was Mary.

"You look rested, Mary," said Hester.

"I am. I've had a whole day to myself—no rehearsal," Mary said, "and now, the first free evening in two years." She turned to Stephen, expecting the understanding he had displayed all summer.

"Yes," he said, without interest.

Mary felt a little flat. He must be tired, she thought.

"There are the others," said Hester, as the bell sounded again.

Mary stood a little apart, watching the two families greet each other. They are old friends, as Hester said, she thought, seeing how warmly Mr. Tuttle greeted Stephen. Two tall young men and a girl stood waiting in the background. Mary's eyes met those of the young man who was later introduced to her as Mr. Tuttle's son. A little current of amusement passed between them at this deferential waiting upon the elders.

Then there was a general mingling of the groups. Mr. Tuttle shook hands with her in the kind of cordiality Mary understood. Her own father had that bluff and hearty manner. It came out of the Middle West. But it seemed odd in this New York apartment, and odder still against the smooth coolness of Mr. Tuttle's wife and daughter. The daughter was perfect in her composure . . . Miss Tuttle a familiar type to Mary, sitting night after night as she did, looking out on New York's well-to-do. Mrs. Tuttle familiar, too. Mary had played at one or two benefits. Some of the patronesses she remembered well.

For a moment Mary wondered why on earth she was here. Her own crowd would be much more alive, much more interesting.

Then young Jo Tuttle stepped to her side. He lifted one eyebrow, as if to say, "We're not so stiff as we seem."

"I hear you're going to play this evening. Maybe I might accompany you. Okay?" He had said it to sound her out, to see if she would turn up her nose at an unknown accompanist. Then, amused at her direct gaze, he went on, "You're wondering how well I play."

"Well . . . how well do you play?"

"I'll tell you. It's like my honesty—indifferently sound. Well-trained, you know, and all that, but no particular reason to work too hard over it. But you, of course—"

"Say it," said Mary. "I make my living by it, you mean."

Jo laughed. "There's nothing indifferent about your honesty."

He was charming. His eyes were an astonishingly clear blue, engaging and careless. Something in his leisurely manners, his air of having plenty of time for everything, added to the sense of rest Mary had got out of the day. The relentless beat, beat of her work, which she had been carrying in the back of her mind, began to leave her.

Seated between father and son at the table, she found she was enjoying herself. Everyone seemed to be, except Stephen.

He was having a little heavy going with Mrs. Tuttle. Poor dear, Mary thought.

Jo Senior joked Hester, teased his wife a little, too. There seemed to be a good deal of bantering in his attitude toward his family. "I really haven't any wife," he said. "She's an institution. Patron of art, patron of music. Aren't you, dear?"

"Why shouldn't I be?" Mrs. Tuttle said in deep earnest, glancing at him briefly. "Jo is absorbed in his business."

Turning to Mary, Jo said, "I hear you're from Iowa. Out where the tall corn grows, eh?"

"No one ever allows me to forget it in New York," she told him with a smile.

"Do you want to?" he asked.

"No, not really."

"My folks came from Illinois."

"Dad never allows us to forget that, either, or the years we lived in Chicago." It was Jane speaking, her voice high and sweet.

"We were farmers three generations ago," he went on, casting a sidewise glance at Jane. "Had a lot of land at one time. Got some of it yet, although the oil hounds have tried to get it away from me on a long lease. If there's oil there, it's as good for me as for them. Oil would bring us more than corn."

Mary heard young Purcell—Celly, as they called him—say to Hester on the other side of the table, "I hope I'll get a chance in my profession. It's pretty crowded, you see."

Celly, then, wasn't rich. She wondered what he was doing.

Jo Senior boomed on. "Know Iowa pretty well, too. It's good country. Rich around war time. Down a little now. Too much corn."

"Look here, Dad," said young Jo, "this girl's a musician, not a farmer."

"That's your line and your mother's, not mine," said his father.

Young Jo expertly took over the conversation.

Mary liked him. Probably because he didn't take himself too seriously, she thought.

As they went into the living room after dinner, Hester turned to Mrs. Tuttle with a little gracious air that suggested the evening had been planned with her in mind. "Knowing of your interest in music," she said, "I thought perhaps you might like to hear Mary Trencher."

The effect on Mrs. Tuttle was not what Hester had expected. She seemed to stiffen. But she settled herself to listen.

A little puzzled, Hester sat down near her. She's very lovely in that dress, Hester was thinking, looking at Flora Tuttle's gracefully erect figure. The dress was a soft purple that deepened the blue of her eyes. I've seen such a combination of colors only in flower arrangements in Japan . . . blue and purple iris together. Very clever. It should put softness into her eyes. I wonder what she's thinking.

The steely glint in Mrs. Tuttle's eyes was due actually to her misunderstanding of Hester's motive. How often it had happened . . . she had thought people asked her for herself and then had found that they wanted to get something out of her. So what Hester Chase really wanted out of the evening was to get influence, or perhaps money, for this unknown girl—playing now, Mrs. Tuttle had to grant to herself, extraordinarily well.

There was admiration in young Jo's eyes as he looked at Mary. "You're good," he said when she had finished. "Where'd you get such precision?"

"I play in the orchestra at Botti's every evening."

"You do!" said Jo. "I knew I'd seen you somewhere before." He laid his cigarette on the corner of the piano. "Let's see what we can do. No one's listening now."

They glanced around the room. Celly and Jane were deep in conversation. Mrs. Tuttle and Hester were examining the Chinese picture that had caught Mary's attention on the first day she had come to see Hester. Stephen and Jo Senior had

lighted cigars, and now that they had given proper attention to the music, evidently considered themselves free for a talk.

"Steve," said Jo, "I'd like to ask your advice about a trip I've got in mind. You know, I was in Europe last year. It's netted me a lot of business in Russia . . . tractors and plows. Looks as though I might do something from the Siberia end. Thought I'd go out on a little trip this spring, take the family along. See the cherry blossoms in Japan, and so on. You think there'd be any business to get in China?"

"Hell, no," said Stephen.

"Aren't you a little conservative?" Jo didn't like to have his ideas condemned so completely. He chewed on his cigar for a minute.

"Jo, it's the thing you talked about in your office that first day I saw you. Country's too old, land divided and divided again. Little plots of ground all through the Yangtze Valley, which is the richest part of China, divided with dykes around the rice fields."

"Well, they could use *plows*, couldn't they? I don't have to sell them tractors."

"A Chinese with half an acre of land afford a plow?"

"I can't believe it. Things you've got around here—" Jo's gesture with his cigar took in the fine Eastern furnishings of the room—"they only belong to a rich people. You can't tell me they can't buy plows!"

"Rich men in China don't need plows. They use coolies," Stephen said. "But you always were a stubborn cuss, Jo. I expect you'll have to see for yourself."

Jo grinned. This was the Steve he was used to, fighting it out with him, giving no quarter. He guessed they were back on the old basis. He'd got it across to Steve that he'd never meant to let him down.

Celly and Jane had risen.

"Go along," said Hester smiling as they came toward her. "Mrs. Tuttle told me when she accepted for you that you had a later engagement."

"I think, perhaps—" Mrs. Tuttle glanced at her wrist watch, made a motion as if to leave, too.

"Oh, you mustn't go yet," said Hester. What on earth had she done to vex Mrs. Tuttle? "I've asked Vera Lichens, the musician, to come in and meet you. I should have mentioned it, but I expected her earlier. Besides, everyone's so comfortable." Hester glanced around at the group. A pity to disturb them.

Stephen and Jo had gone in the dining room. Through the doorway Hester could see they had the atlas spread out on the table, were deep in some map. Young Jo and Mary were playing together, their music carefully subdued not to interfere with the talk.

"Oh, of course," said Mrs. Tuttle.

Conversation lagged between them. The friendship, Hester was convinced, would have to be between Jo and Stephen. It couldn't be on a family footing. She was grateful for Mary's and young Jo's playing. It covered an awkward moment, and after a little Vera Lichens, let in quietly by Anna, came into the room. She acknowledged Hester's low-voiced introduction of Mrs. Tuttle, sat down, indicating that she did not wish to interrupt the music.

"I think we've met before, Miss Lichens," said Mrs. Tuttle in a firm voice. "Last winter? You remember the benefit for indigent musicians?"

Vera nodded graciously, not speaking.

"I've been wondering," Flora Tuttle went on, "as I've been sitting here listening to Miss Trencher's playing, what she expects to get out of her musical education. There are so many girls like that. Without money or influence, how can they hope to have any appreciable success?"

She speaks as if Mary were merchandise, thought Hester hotly. Before she could answer, Vera said quietly, "Most of us had neither to start with, Mrs. Tuttle. Mary is my most talented pupil. New York may reject her. It devours its young. But I doubt if it can destroy her."

"You are hardly fair to us, are you?" said Mrs. Tuttle. "We have large demands upon us. We do what we can for the thousands of boys and girls pouring into the city each year."

We? thought Hester. Then suddenly she realized that Mrs. Tuttle was suspicious of her reason for introducing Mary Trencher. For a moment Hester was taken aback.

Now she knew they surely could not be friends. Mrs. Tuttle's own fortune plus her husband's shut her into the small orbit of the rich, who did not threaten one another. She moved beyond it only as the giver of charity and the sponsor of art.

"Vera, I want you to meet Mr. Tuttle." Hester, getting up, adroitly gathered her party together, carrying it along on safe subjects.

27

THE day before Christmas, Stephen went back to the warehouse. He surveyed the ordered pandemonium brought about by last-minute rush orders—city rush orders before the holiday. Certainly it wasn't a very good time to tackle Stackpole. He himself was working, side by side with a couple of tired-looking, oldish men. Lord! thought Stephen. I ought to wait till this is over. He said to Stackpole, "Got a few minutes?"

"No, I haven't. Why'd you come today?" Stackpole, when he was busy, was evidently no respecter of persons.

"Orders," said Stephen. He beckoned Stackpole out of ear-shot of the men. "We think you're overstaffed up here. We want you to weed out your slowest workers—about five per cent of your candlers and about ten per cent of your assemblers."

"When?"

"Tonight."

"So that's the report you took back to the boss, is it? Well, I'll be damned if I will! Who's running this warehouse, anyway?"

"Who do *you* think?" asked Stephen tersely.

Angry and fearful, Stackpole hopped ahead of Stephen back toward the men, his coat shortened behind by the rigid arc of his rheumatic shoulders. "My slowest workers, in some cases, happen to be the ones who've been here the longest. I'll let out a few of the fastest . . . I mean they're the fastest when I'm watching them. The dependable ones will be the most economical in the end. You can tell Middleton that," he flung over his shoulder.

As Stephen reached the door, he glanced back at the great floor of the warehouse, stacked with huge crates, trucks lined up, men hurrying like driven beasts. He had a sudden unpleasant realization that the scene was a little too much like scenes in China which he had felt could never be duplicated in America. Even in the damp cold of the warehouse, the sweat showed through the men's shirts. Two men had drawn a little apart from the others, one gesturing with his thumb in Stephen's direction. The other, slowly, deliberately, spat on the floor.

28

HESTER and Stephen trimmed Tim's first tree, a tree whose top just cleared the ceiling. The clean smell of the fir needles filled the room. They worked in silence, covering it with ornaments, placing innumerable toys in its branches, at its base. Nothing had been neglected from the star on its topmost twig to the Child in the Manger at its foot. Their first Christmas together with Tim.

When they had finished, Stephen brought out his presents for Hester. "That'll leave Christmas morning for Tim. I hope you'll like them," he said, trying to disguise his eagerness over the rich gifts he was about to give her.

"Them?" said Hester. "Are there more than one?"

"Three," said Stephen, his voice reaching her muffled from the hall closet where he had hidden his parcels.

As she waited, Hester felt steal over her the sheltered safety of being greatly loved.

The packages fell in her lap. "Open the letter first," said Stephen.

She took out of an envelope a registration card. For Tim. "Why, Stephen! He's so little. And isn't this a very expensive school?"

"He doesn't enter till he's four. You have to register them a long time ahead. Middleton's boys go there," he answered. "We want Tim to have the best, don't we? We decided that, when we knew he was coming. Middleton says they repeat in the school the experiences the nation has outgrown—give the kids the toughening that our pioneer life used to give us." He did not tell her how difficult it had been, even with Middleton's wire-pulling, to get Tim's name enrolled. "Better see what's in the big box next," he said. "That's really for you."

Opening the stiff cardboard box, Hester's fingers touched soft, silky fur. She drew out a cape of silver fox. The silvery tips were so close set that the fur seemed almost to be covered with frost.

"I got them from Einstein," he said. "Remember Einstein's place where we went that day? These are the best. Anyone would see, who knows furs at all, that the white tips couldn't have been glued on. There are too many. It's done sometimes with the cheaper skins, you know."

Hester smoothed the pelts as she had that day last summer.

"Put it on," commanded Stephen. "Get your hat and let's see how you look. . . . Yes, it suits you," he said, standing off to survey her.

A little chill settled over Hester at this cool valuation of Stephen's. Whatever she wore had always seemed right to him because she wore it.

She opened the third package, her interest flagging a little as she saw what was in the small parcel.

"Like it?" asked Stephen, as she studied the gleaming diamond.

"It's beautiful." She continued to look at it, making no move to put it on her finger. Why had he given her this ring? She never wore jewelry. A sense of disaster began to settle over Hester. He could not have been thinking of her when he chose this.

"I was hoping you'd like it." Stephen turned away, his shoulders stiff with disappointment. His only justification of himself, since the scene at the warehouse, had been that he could shower on Hester and Tim things to make them happy. A new and strange, although very tiny sense of resentment toward her mingled with his disappointment. Hester, holding him back from peace with himself.

"Oh! I do like it," exclaimed Hester, hastily putting on the ring. She slipped behind him, put her hands on his shoulders, faced him around, looked into his eyes. "Stephen . . . how about it?"

"How about what?"

"About you? About your work?"

"Seems to be all right. Why?"

"I don't know. Sometimes I think you're not . . . well, really happy."

"Happy as most," he said, turning away.

From outside came a tumult of chimes. The new carillon down the Avenue . . . Hester remembered that it was to be played the first time this Christmas Eve. She opened the window and the clear sound of the bells filled the room.

"It's snowing," she said.

Out of the sky snow was falling in heavy flakes, muffling the city's lights and noise. Out of the limitless sky, softly, relentlessly, it fell. It lay on the flat housetops below her, along the window ledge, a symbol of man, of his finite self in a universe infinite, groping his way.

An alarm sounded deep within Hester. He needs me and I can't reach him.

She turned back to the lighted room. It was empty, but through the doorway of the bedroom, she saw Stephen stand-

ing by Tim's crib. She went in and stood beside him. "I've a present for you, too, Stephen."

29

LEFT and right of the orchestra, Botti had arranged small, modernistic Christmas trees made of a hollow material wired from within. When Mary entered, the house lights had been turned off and the trees glowed pale blue, bringing out unearthly shimmerings from synthetic snow heaped around their bases. She saw that Botti had known very well what he was doing. His effect was up-to-date, fashionable, yet as emotionally suggestive as the interior of a temple. Pale blue light fell on the black piano, reflected in its glossy polish and on its luminous keyboard. The rows of tables with their white cloths possessed in the semi-darkness a sheltered privacy.

"Look," Botti had said at rehearsal to his musicians, "anything else you play, give it all you've got, but don't jazz up any of these Christmas carols. Put in one about every fourth number, but keep it simple. You," he said to Mary, "can lead out on the carols. I've planned my set just religious enough so the contrast'll have an effect."

Had Botti known it, his scheme had been given precedence centuries before, when, at the festival of the winter solstice, the popular street song and noisy ribaldry were placed cheek by jowl with the sacred hymns sung for the salvation of man's soul.

Mary began the first carol, playing it so softly that the notes carried a barely sustained thread of melody. God rest you, merry gentlemen. Let nothing you dismay. In a moment the crowd was singing it, as Botti had known they would be.

Let nothing us dismay, Lord.

The roomful of revelers sang the carol with gusto. Botti, standing in the inner doorway, smoothed down the front of

his evening shirt. It would be a big night and the customers would spend.

At intermission, Mary looked up to see a young man standing near her.

"You remember me?" he asked.

For a moment, still intent on the music, she did not recognize him. Tall, good-looking, clear blue eyes. Evening clothes worn very well.

"Jo Tuttle . . . at the Chases', remember?" he said.

"Oh . . . hello," she said.

"Can you join me at my table?"

"Why, yes, for a little while. I'd like to," she said.

He showed her to the table where he had been sitting. "What can I order for you?"

"I've only a few minutes."

"After you're through here, then, could we go somewhere and talk?"

"I'm due at a party," said Mary.

"I skipped a party to come and see you," he countered. A little coolly he appraised her, testing out his first impression of her.

Mary looked at him. "This dress belongs to the management. My street togs do?"

"Sure they'll do. We'll go any place you like."

She thought he looked a little taken aback, but she wasn't certain. It made her, for a moment, want to wound him. "You know, I really oughtn't to have forgotten your name."

"What special reason had you for remembering it?" he asked.

"It was on every piece of machinery we used on the farm. Big, black letters."

"That's me." Jo grinned. "I mean, that's us. The family. Our business."

"How odd," said Mary, a curious look in her face.

"Why?" He was puzzled.

"Those machines seemed my greatest enemy all the time I

was growing up. Each month something to pay on them, and I wanted music lessons."

"But you needed the machines."

"Not all of them. At least, not more than my mother needed a washing machine."

"Awfully sorry," retorted Jo. "We don't handle washing machines."

As she went back to the group of musicians, a little secret feeling of pleasure that had lain in the back of her mind ever since she had been aware of his interest that evening at Hester's, leaped up in Mary. She knew she had really half expected to see him somewhere again . . . that he would arrange it.

Jo waited through the rest of Mary's numbers. On an impulse, he had come away from the opera, excusing himself to the others in his mother's box. Something about Mary Trencher he hadn't been able to forget. He wanted to see if it still held when he saw her again. So far, he wasn't sure.

At last Mary was free. In the late night, the city was folded and wrapped in snow. Flakes swirled stormily into the light around the street lamps, floated in the luminous cones made by car headlights.

"We'd never get downtown in a taxi in this," said Mary, as Jo started to hail a driver.

"Right," said Jo. "Then it'll have to be the elevated."

They waited silently on the platform high above the street. The wind sent the snow before them, scooping it up.

As he guided her into the train, Mary felt against her arm the thick, beautiful texture of Jo's overcoat. It seemed, in some strange way she could not analyze, to express to her a kind of protection she had never known.

"Christmas Eve," said Jo, as the train rocked along, bearing them south. "I like it." He looked at her with a shy, friendly, amazingly young grin.

He's lonesome, thought Mary, with a rush of astonishment. I am, too, a little. Perhaps it's the snow.

In the quiet and elegant restaurant to which he took her, where the waiters moved so deferentially, Mary had a feeling of delight in relaxation after the day's hard work. Jo watched her as she ate with healthy appetite the warm, rich food he ordered.

"I'd like to get tired the way you do, working, and as hungry as that," he said.

"Why don't you? Exercise would do it," said Mary.

"You're very prickly. I wonder why I hunted you out. You know," he said, lifting one eyebrow, "you're a snob."

"I?"

"All you working people are. Think the rich aren't worthy because they don't work."

"Well, if you put it that way, I guess I am," answered Mary, contrasting him with Jim Sawyer to Jo's disadvantage.

"Suppose you look down on me and I'll look down on you. It cancels out, doesn't it?" He regarded her with amusement. "How's for not making any more nasty cracks?" And then, quite suddenly, he added, "You know, I'd like to be taken seriously as an individual." As he spoke, neither his voice nor his face any longer expressed banter.

One moment they were hostile to each other, the next stirred by some attraction of mind and body. Her long, untapered fingers fascinated him. He liked her grasp, firm and strong. Mary, having consented to come with him at first largely because to do so satisfied her pride, found her senses stirring under his gaze.

Outside, the storm gained in intensity, sweeping across the country from the Rockies, muffling sounds of revelry and carol singing. It fell over the old grave mounds of Indian tribes, their outlines not extinct, over the farms where it lay in white sheets, over the wide, tilled acres of the new world, its cities, its towns. It fell on the rivers and disappeared, into the Mississippi and the Ohio, the Connecticut and the Merrimack, flowing black and silent between their white banks.

As Jo and Mary came out of the restaurant, plows were

beginning to clear the snow away. Already black slush filled the more frequented streets and avenues. Far off, at the end of the street between the massed walls of the buildings, the beginning light of the day was a clear, translucent gold.

"I'd no idea it was so late," said Mary. "Why, it's morning." It's Christmas and I'm tired to death, she thought. They stood for a moment silently watching the growing light in the east.

30

ROUND-EYED, Tim viewed the tree from Stephen's arms. His vocabulary, still so small, failed him entirely. He jiggled himself up and down, reaching out for the bright bauble of the tree.

"Look, pet," Hester tried to attract his attention with a bright red ball. He grasped it for a moment, threw it excitedly away, fascinated by things just out of reach. "Want! Tim want!"

Stephen put him in his own big chair. The baby's hair was rumpled, the collar of his sleeping suit stood up like a ruff, making his round cheeks look rounder.

"He's such a darling," cried Hester, kneeling before him, feeling for his toes beneath the mittened feet of the sleeping suit.

Stephen piled his lap with presents . . . monkeys and teddy bears and ducks to float in his bath. His cheeks grew brighter, his eyes wider with excitement. "Tim want!" and he tried to grasp them all at once.

Stephen noticed how firmly his small hands, so like his own, held things. He's going to be efficient . . . I can give him every chance. He took Tim into his arms, walked up and down with him.

The memory of the men at the warehouse at last could be blotted out, here in his little son.

31

UNDER the slow but continuous pressure of his job, Stephen's weariness grew. He came to the end of the day more tired, it seemed to him, than he had ever been.

I don't seem to be able to put myself into my work the way I used to. It must be this fiendish weather, he said to himself.

That carrying out the shrewd, hard policies of Middleton had anything to do with it, he would not grant. And then he really did forget about it, in the sudden necessity to think only of self-preservation.

The January day was dark with rain and sleet. The lights were on in the office buildings. When Stephen returned from lunch, he found on his desk a memorandum from Middleton.

"Get in touch with Snow," it said. "He's got a bright idea about how we can lengthen out our chain of stores."

Umph! thought Stephen. Wonder why Snow didn't take the matter up with me? That would be the routine way.

But after he had talked with Snow, he saw what was up. At least one man under him was watching for the chance to step into his shoes.

The threat to his position brought Stephen a drive more ruthless than any he had ever experienced before. Weather or no weather, he found his nerves stepping up to meet a new and powerful call upon his energies. All his fine executive ability, once used for the organization he served, he used now to keep his precarious footing on the high pinnacle of the top job next to the boss. To do it, he had always to think of the main chance. It involved a great many things he had never considered possible before—the careful subordination of those just under him, so that their abilities in no way caught Middleton's attention; the careful subordination of his own abilities, so that every accomplishment in the business ap-

peared to be the outgrowth of Middleton's genius. Never let Middleton forget that only he, Stephen Chase, in the organization was capable of appreciating that genius fully in giving him the support he needed.

He began to study Middleton for just the right approach—a shade of deference in his voice when he addressed him he found was very acceptable. Always watchful, too, to be affable toward every one of the big men who had any touch with the business, so that they, if they spoke of him at all to Middleton, spoke of him with enthusiasm.

It meant innumerable hours given over to leisured conversation, hours he could not spare from his work, and which he replaced with hours taken from his own private store. Going down through the building after the scrubwomen had begun their work, he saw other men, like himself, leaving.

His position meant, too, he soon saw, the unostentatious display of money. Any sign of not having money was a point against him in this fierce, competitive game. In this, as in everything else, Middleton gave friendly suggestions. An exclusive club or two to which Stephen should belong.

"It gives you the best opportunities—better food, quieter. You aren't rushed by the waiters, if you want to talk over a ticklish point in business. I'll put you up for a couple."

"I'm already up for one. My friend Jo Tuttle wanted me to join his. But it takes a couple of years to get in," Stephen said casually. It was the first time he had used Jo's friendship. He found it had its effect.

Clothes counted, too. Middleton mentioned his own tailor. "Good," he said, "if a little expensive."

It was on Middleton's suggestion that Stephen began to invest in stocks and bonds. "A few leads are always a help," he told Stephen. "I happen to know the men who can give them."

Stephen saw he liked to give this advice and was careful to ask it.

Once centered upon his own advancement, Stephen went

about it with efficiency. He didn't skip a detail. For the first time in his life he began scrutinizing Hester from the standpoint of whether she was an asset to him in getting on. Everything about her had always been dear to him, because she was Hester. He now saw that she could make more of her attributes than she did. She underplayed her dainty and petite self. Instinctively, she chose the clothes that made her inconspicuous, as if she wanted some kind of protective coloring. He saw that she lacked a certain studied show of money in her dressing that would lend to his prestige when she dropped into the office, as occasionally she did, and when they went out for the evening with Middleton and his wife. Lately, the Doogans had been asking them to join their crowd.

Hester did not like the emphasis on display, but remembering Stephen's withdrawal at Christmas over the ring, she said nothing, did her best to dress as Stephen would have her.

32

YOUNG Jo went about his duties at his father's office undriven by any great incentive. His father had put him in the advertising division, but there were others to do the work. Jo came and went as it suited his pleasure. All Jo Senior exacted was that he appear sometime during the day.

Wish we'd get a little sunlight, thought Jo, turning on the light over his desk, late one January afternoon. He would run over the letters brought him to sign, then he would go. In the outer office the typewriters were clicking, the girls making speed now, at the end of the day. He must pass along the aisles between them, representative of his father, be affable like his father.

The buzzer sounded. So his father wanted to see him.

"Hello, there, Dad. What can I do for you?" he asked, strolling into his father's office, sitting down on the corner of the desk, swinging his foot.

"Just come in?" asked Jo Senior. "I've been trying to get you all the afternoon. I don't want to be hard, Jo, but when I give you something to do—" He held up the slip of paper in his hand.

Young Jo saw the heading. "Oh, that concern out west you asked me to write to? I'll get around to it tomorrow."

"Look here, Jo. Business is business. Whatever I give you, no matter how small it seems, should be tended to!"

Young Jo did not speak for a moment. He knew his father never gave him anything important to do, that he didn't expect important things of him. Young Jo understood his place in the family, that long ago he had been surrendered to his mother to make what she would of him—the fine gentleman she had once hoped to make of his father. Not game on his father's part to be disappointed in him now.

"Awfully sorry, Dad. Send me a memo tomorrow," he said carelessly.

A little baffled, Jo Senior looked after him. "'Phone your mother," he called shortly. "She wants you for something."

He was in no mood to be an understudy tonight, young Jo told himself as he picked up the telephone. He called the house. "Mater?" His mother liked that term. "Have to make it snappy, I'm speaking from the office."

"Jo, dear, why don't you leave the office? It's getting late."

"I've been thinking of it," he told her. "Dutiful son telling his mother he's stepping out this evening."

"Now, Jo, I do want you this evening. I'm having very important people. You'll ruin my table."

"So sorry. This has just come up. Can't possibly make it. 'By." Hastily he put down the receiver, caught up his hat and overcoat. Better to be gone from the office before she called back.

It's very odd, he thought, as he went toward Botti's. On Christmas Eve he had gone to see Mary Trencher following a whim. Tonight he was actuated by some need to see her. I can't remember her face very well, but I do her hands. Strong

and firm, the muscles developed. They'd given him a strange sensation when he'd taken hold of them. Feminine hands, as he knew them, were fragile. His mother's, which often toyed with his. The girls he went around with, their hands as beautiful and inexpressive as their faces.

At intermission Mary looked up to see Jo Tuttle standing before her. "Oh, it's you," she said. But he thought he saw a look of pleasure come into her eyes.

"You know," Jo said, tipping the shade of the low electric lamp on the restaurant table so that it threw her face into relief, "I couldn't remember how you looked."

"That's too bad." Mary watched him playing with the lampshade, moving it this way and that, throwing highlights, shadows, on her face.

He looked puzzled and then interested at the result.

"Jo, what are you trying to do?" she demanded.

"Look," he said.

"I can't exactly look at my own face, can I?"

"Your face reminds me of Grandfather," he said.

"Well, you're a gallant one. Take a girl out and tell her she reminds you of your grandfather!"

"High cheekbones, like this—" Jo sketched in the air with one finger—"and . . . I don't know. It's in the cast of your features. No, it's something to do with the muscles. Pioneer features, I guess."

"Are you trying to tell me I'm just a country girl?" asked Mary.

"Maybe. Dad's got a little of it left in his face, only he's too fat."

Mary studied Jo.

"No," he said, "you won't find it in me. It's lost now to our family. Mother's seen to that."

There was something in his voice that touched Mary. Then he was suddenly flippant again. "Mother shapes me yet. The umbilical cord of the mind hasn't been cut between us."

"Jo, I can't figure you out."

"Would you like to, Mary?"

"Yes. I rather think I would. What is it you're trying to say? Your mother shapes you to what?"

"To what she once thought she could make of Dad," he said. "Funny, isn't it? Dad, shaped to anything like me! Big, bumbling, old Dad, friendly as an old dog, and smart . . . boy, is he smart!"

Mary caught the admiration in Jo's voice. "Look," she said. "How about being yourself?"

"I? There wouldn't be room for two of us at our house." He said it gaily, but again, as she had on Christmas Eve, Mary sensed that he was lonely. Growing in her was the realization that he was without purpose, because that was what, for some strange reason, his people exacted of him. Something in her rose up to do battle for him.

"See here, my girl, you like me as I am. Lots of people do," said Jo.

"Well, you know, I do, Jo," Mary answered.

"Let's dance."

He did not dip below his bantering ways again that evening.

In the days that followed, Jo sought Mary out with increasing frequency, not alone in the evening, but at noon or at any time she was free. There was no breaking of routine for Mary, no getting off for an evening. Her job depended on unwavering attention to her schedule. Neither did she ever give up a lesson, nor skip a rehearsal. It wasn't hard for him to fit himself into the rigorous demands of her days. All his life he had fitted himself to someone else's life.

On the first of March a soft spring wind blew over the city. Mary had a half-hour before going over for afternoon rehearsal. There was a rat-a-tat of her knocker and a "Hi-hi!"—Jo's gay salute.

"Why, Jo!" she exclaimed, opening the door to him. "What are you doing here at this time of day? I've only a minute."

"I've only a minute, you mean. The family's about to move en masse, after its ancient custom."

"Do be sensible, Jo. What is it?"

"I mean it. It's the long-talked-of hegira to the East. It's coming off after all. Dad said the word this morning. The tribe marches."

Mary looked at him, standing there in the middle of her cramped living room. He was so utterly bound into his family. Her heart beat heavily.

Suddenly Jo's face twisted with a kind of anguish. With a stride he reached her, covered her face, her throat, with his kisses, in one passionate embrace made clear to her his passionate love. Out of his eyes looked a man she did not know, a man not bound into his family.

"I can't leave you, Mary, when I've just told you I love you. You're my woman. I don't want ever to leave you."

"Why do you go, Jo?" One hand clutched the lapel of his coat. Her lips trembled. "Let them go without you."

His emotion hid itself, his mind once more running in old channels. "I've got to. They wouldn't understand. It would make an awful mess. Dad's sending me on ahead to get some letters of introduction for him from men he knows on the west coast. Family coming in a few days. Celly's going, too, as Dad's secretary. Dad's offered him the trip. Didn't want to do it much, but Jane won him over."

"For how long, Jo?"

"Three or four months."

"Jo, I've got to go. Come around after the show."

"I can't. I'm leaving at eight."

"Jo—"

"Mary!" It was a cry wrenched from Jo. "Promise me you'll wait."

"Yes. I'll wait."

Mary was frightened at the power of her feeling. Jo threatened, as Jim Sawyer had not, the hard core of her artist's ambition. She fought it. She had no wish to love Jo. She

was not blind to the struggle it would mean, nor what her own contribution would be. She would be the shelter within which he would find the strength to live his own life, not the life determined for him by his father and mother. To marry her would mean his breaking away from the tradition of money. Mary was coming to know the power of money in this city.

Why, she felt with a little helplessness, if she had to love anyone, couldn't it have been Jim?

33

DOOGAN had dropped in at the office to see Middleton. Doogan had had the merger's account since its organization.

"Perhaps you fellows don't know it," he said, "but when we started out to put you over with the public, we had something to contend with. You were in a little bad with the public. They didn't like the idea of your scooping up the small concerns.

Middleton nodded. "But not now, eh?"

"Now, about this scheme of yours to wait until the last minute to buy perishable fruits from the farmers—"

"Yes. Strawberries, for instance. If we wait until the crop is dead ripe, we can drive a pretty good bargain, get them at our own price. Give the customer the benefit. Can you work us up a publicity story from that angle?"

"Sure. And a couple of articles telling how the strawberry crop would have rotted if the merger hadn't taken it over."

"Fine. Go ahead on it."

On the way out, Doogan stopped Stephen. "Say, Steve," he said, "think you could get Tuttle's account for me? We've been working on him, but we can't get him to listen."

"Why . . . I'll do what I can," Stephen said, "as soon as he gets back. He's in the Far East just now." Remembering Tuttle's words about Doogan, Stephen didn't much like saying anything to him, and yet he didn't see how he could get

out of it. He wondered a little if he'd ever get Doogan paid. There'd been any number of business favors that Doogan obviously expected in return for getting him this job. Slowly, scarcely knowing how it came about, he was finding that this business was involving him more and more with Doogan.

"We'd appreciate it," said Doogan.

34

STEPHEN made it a point, whenever he got home in time, to give Tim his supper, put him to bed. "It's my only chance to see him," he told Hester.

On a March afternoon with spring in it, the windows were open and the sun was still in the apartment when Stephen came home.

Tonight Stephen thought, He's not plump and round the way he used to be. He looked at his son carefully and a little anxiously. "Is it time for him to be shooting up and getting thin?" he asked Hester.

"No. Do you think he's thin?" Hester asked.

"Come on, son." Stephen put Tim in his high chair. "We've got to get away with this plateful of supper."

Hester delighted in watching the two of them, Stephen's strong figure, Tim's slight one.

Tim pushed away the dish Anna set before him, reached for his milk. His brown eyes over the rim of his mug surveyed his father, decided against the milk.

Stephen sat down to the long struggle of getting the proper amount of nourishment into him. "Here you are. One mouthful for Tim, one for the blue duck."

The duck, his yellow bill open, his painted feathers sleek against his sides, was Tim's favorite toy. He grasped it now, holding it against him, his small fingers trying to close the open bill. Stephen, seeing his attention diverted, popped a spoonful of porridge into his mouth.

Tim began to wail loudly, the food lying unswallowed on his tongue.

"Let me try." Hester lifted him from his high chair, took him on her lap.

Tim stopped crying. "Peek?" he said, peering at his father between spread fingers.

Stephen stood regarding him. His mind, for a moment, had taken a backward fling to that last station of his in China . . . the hollowed-out bowl of dusty land, the grotesque figures of the starving.

"Look here, Tim," he said. "No more fooling! This food's to be eaten."

Tim ate, the tears brimming over, running down his cheeks.

"Aren't you a little harsh?" asked Hester, laying her hand gently on Tim's head.

When Stephen did not answer, she knew too late that she had said the wrong thing. After a few minutes she slipped away, leaving Stephen to put Tim to bed.

As she sat waiting for him, she began to realize that she seemed now to wound him as she never had wounded him before. She felt on uncertain ground with him. Listening to their voices, Tim's high baby soprano, Stephen's even tones, she thought how often of late Stephen's voice sounded irritated.

Was he overworked? She had seen him work as hard as this before, but with a kind of harmony in himself he did not now display. She felt her sense of security in him going. In a kind of panic she clutched for it.

It's I, she said. I fail him somehow.

BEFORE the freshness of the August morning was gone, Stephen turned the car into the long private road that led through the Tuttle acres. In the two weeks of his vacation,

he had taken Hester and Tim through New England in the beautiful new car he had bought in the spring and hadn't had much chance to use. Now they were driving down into Pennsylvania to spend the last day with the Tuttles.

A letter from Jo, written on the steamer, mailed in San Francisco, had urged Stephen to motor down to his farm. Stephen had wired an answer saying they would come today.

"It'll be fun to hear Jo talk about China, won't it?" Stephen said to Hester. "I wonder what he made of it."

Hester was absorbed in steadying Tim in Stephen's lap, so that he could put his hands on the wheel just below his father's. "Careful around the curve, so he won't bump his nose," she cautioned.

They swept around the turn and the grey stone Pennsylvania farmhouse stood before them.

As the car came to a stop, Jo crossed the lawn from the house, shouting cordial greeting. "Excuse my get-up," he said to Hester, "but I'm a farmer these days." He had on baggy trousers, his blue chambray shirt open at the throat. "Hi, there, boy," he said, picking Tim out of Stephen's lap. "Wish mine were little like this," he went on. "I've hated to see them grow up. You don't have them after they're grown. Jo's been restless, wants to get up to town, ever since we've been back, and Jane's rattling around like a pebble in a boot."

"Down," demanded Tim. After the long ride, he wanted to use his legs.

Jo hardly gave Stephen time to get out of the car before he plunged into talk. "Never so disappointed in my life in anything as I was in China," he said. "Don't wonder you came home, Steve. Do you know, I didn't see one plow, except a blade fastened onto a crooked stick. As for threshing, they use a flail. I felt as if I'd jumped out of modern times right on to a page of the Bible."

"It's a great market for you, Jo," said Stephen slyly. "Isn't that what you're looking for?"

"Cut it out, Steve," said Jo. "With all that poverty! I

never thought it would be like that," he complained, as if he had been purposely fooled. "Time we debunked that idea about the romantic East. I don't see how you ever stuck it out all those years, Steve."

"Oh, I don't know," answered Stephen. And suddenly he was filled with nostalgic longing for himself as he had been when he walked the Manchurian plains, believing that the light from the West would bring progress. Now he was not so sure of the gift of the West. The greatest gift ever given him had come out of the East . . . the friendship of Ho.

He had a sudden clear picture of Ho, tall, dressed in his dove-colored silk gown, his hands folded in his sleeves. The barriers of reticence and caution holding two men of alien cultures apart gradually had lowered as respect for each other grew into friendship. He remembered how humble and yet proud he had felt when Ho, entangled as he was in the life of the clan and the guild, had risked his position in each, in order to be friend to him. He saw Ho as he sat on the deck of the launch, taking him into the intricacies of Chinese business. Ho's knees were spread far apart, the skirt of his silk gown falling between. His long, narrow feet, encased in satin slippers, planted firmly upon the deck, his hands with their delicate tapered fingers spread out on his knees.

Friendship, indeed. Years later, when in the midst of the most bitter feeling the Chinese had ever had for the white man, who they felt had exploited China, the Company had sent him back to Ho's city. Ho had come openly to the dock to meet him. He could hear Ho's voice now, speaking with ancient courtesy, "How is your honorable self?" Then the crowd had closed about them, spitting upon him, hissing Ho.

In quiet dignity he walked at my side, thought Stephen. Then came the painful memory of the last time he had seen Ho, surrounded by the mob, stoned and degraded because he had been friend to Stephen. His shoulders, his great head looming above the little men who pushed him along. Ho, the Chinese gentleman, quietly accepting death to fulfill his obli-

gation of friendship. He remembered Ho's words, "You in your country think of business, we of relationship."

And yet, that ideal had not saved China from collapse. Had the West something in its hard efficiency that would last?

"If they could buy our machinery, it would save them." Jo's words reached him. "Put machinery on their farms, and I'd be willing to bet you'd have a good country out of China."

With effort Stephen pulled himself back from the tragic happenings of Ho's death to this peaceful scene in America.

Mrs. Tuttle and Jane, in smart sports clothes, met them as Jo took them into the cool dimness of the house.

"So good of you to make all this effort to come 'way down here," Mrs. Tuttle said. "Jo was so anxious to have you."

With a swift motion Jane knelt, sweeping Tim into her arms. "Oh, the dear!" she cried. "Let me take care of him. Want to see the new little puppies, Tim?" She carried him off toward the stables. As she brushed past her mother, anger blazed in both their eyes.

Hester was startled. She was accustomed to cool aloofness on the part of the Tuttle women. I wonder if we've come at the wrong time, she thought.

"Come on, Steve. You've got to see the farm," said Jo.

"How about it, Jo?" said Stephen, as young Jo joined them outside the door. "You disappointed in the Far East, too?"

"I liked it," said Jo. "But not to stay." He looked accusingly at his father.

"Now, see here, Jo. We've been over all that. That's a good job for Celly, and you know it. Steve, here, was out in the Far East the best years of his life, and look what the experience did for him. You see," Jo Senior went on, turning to Stephen, "I needed a good man in Vladivostok as my agent. Gave the job to Celly. Better pay than the boy ever got in his life."

"Dad, the new combine's come," said young Jo.

The three men walked over to a long, low building, in front of which a couple of truckmen were unloading the great machine.

"This is our latest invention," Jo Senior explained. "Always want to check one over myself." He looked at the shining parts with enthusiasm. "Can't keep my hands off 'em. Jo, you take Steve around, will you, while I pay off these boys?"

Stephen and young Jo entered the low building. In a solid phalanx down both sides of its interior stood machines, on each one in bold black letters, *Josiah Tuttle and Co. Farm Implements.*

"Ever been in Vladivostok, Steve?" asked young Jo.

"Yes. I used to be up there a lot."

"Looked like an awful dump to me."

"Well, not exactly that. But I don't see much business up there, as things are now."

"I guessed that. No place for a woman, is it?"

"Hard on them," said Stephen. "Harbor's frozen six months of the year. If you're thinking of Jane, she'd be pretty lonesome."

"No more than she is now," said Jo. "Come on. Dad expects me to show you the place."

As they came back to the house for luncheon, they met Jane and Tim. Jo and Stephen walked ahead. Young Jo took Tim's other hand.

"Well, I've decided," said Jane, not looking up. "Mother wins. She needn't think it's because of what she's said. It's Tim, here, who's made me see it. Vladivostok wouldn't be any place for children, and I want some. They've got to have the same opportunities I've had."

"Don't fool yourself, Sis," said Jo, with brotherly frankness. "That's mother's line. Money marries money for the sake of the families."

"Don't you be so smart. Wait till you run into it. Or maybe you're planning to marry money."

"Jane," said Jo, "if you want to go out and join Celly, I'll

back you up. You can wait a little for the children. If you go, I'll bet Celly'll be back here in a year's time."

"Thanks, Jo." Her hard, young eyes were filled with tears of anger. "But Celly let them do it. That spoils it for me."

"Don't let it. What could Celly do? He gave up his job here to go with Dad."

"I could have managed Dad. He'd have given in. It was mother's swell idea to offer Celly Vladivostok."

A sudden thunderstorm just after lunch delayed the Chases' departure. Darkness overtook them on the road.

Tim slept in Hester's arms. In the light of a passing car, she noticed a smile touch his lips. He struggled up, settled back against her, overcome by sleep.

"I believe he's still chasing puppies," said Stephen.

- His voice was gentle with that quality of quietness that meant the real Stephen to Hester.

The roof of the car, so close over their heads, made a little room for them.

Stephen was thinking, I passed up a perfectly good opportunity today to promote Doogan to Jo. I'm glad I did. Guess it's about time for me to step on Doogan a little.

He was conscious as he drove that the seal ring Ho had given him pressed against his flesh where his hand rested on the steering wheel. So accustomed to wearing it, he did not often think of it, and not often of Ho. But he had today. The many associations with Ho crowded his mind.

"Hester," he said after a while, "do you ever feel homesick for China?"

Hester's heart gave a little leap. This was practically Stephen's first voluntary reference to China since the day of his return, when he had said, "Let's forget the past." At times she had felt he even took elaborate pains to avoid the natural mention of China in their conversation. And now he had broken that silence. Perhaps this was the time when his spirit, more than a little closed to her since his return, would no longer be so. "No, not really," she answered him, "but I

don't want to forget it. Do you, Stephen?" Almost breathlessly she awaited his answer.

"No," he said. "I'm not homesick, that is, I don't want to go back to it as it is now. But today, somehow, talking to Jo brought a lot of things up in my mind." He gave a little chuckle. "Do you remember, Hester, the time Ho brought us presents, and I had to refuse them because the Company said it was bad policy to take gifts, and what a fury Ho was in? Thought I was suspicious that he was trying to bribe me. And how, later, when I went away, he gave me the ring?"

"I was always proud," Hester answered, "that Ho chose you for a friend."

"Were you?" Stephen said, and fell silent.

Hester, fearful that he was retreating again into himself, hastened to ask, "Do you remember the month we had together on the junk, getting to your farthest station on the Yalu River? Sleeping down in the hold, side by side, seeing the mast stretched up almost into the stars?"

"And do you remember the trip we took in the winter?" asked Stephen. There had been the slow days of travel in the mule cart over the frozen river, the long detours into the mountains, the solitary days of their companionship among the remote and snowy hills. Often, the only sign of man a shrine at the top of the pass. "Wanderers' dreams, weren't they?" Stephen said quietly. "How young we were!"

"And now we have Tim," said Hester. Yes, we were young, she thought, but I was close to you then, Stephen.

The day with its memories of his eager beginnings struck against Stephen's reserves. He longed to tell Hester of those last events in China, tell her what it meant to keep his job here in America, have it all out, get back to that understanding he once had had with her. But he could not.

His mind centered again on tomorrow's return to the office. He wasn't a youth any more. He was a man, middle-aged, confronted with the realistic business of making a living.

Hester gave a little sigh, but Stephen, occupied now with driving through New York traffic, did not hear.

36

BOTTI's was crowded . . . not the winter habitués . . . people from out of town, probably. Mary paid little attention to them. Botti's no longer thrilled her. In the beginning, the color and gaiety of the night club, the chance to play in public had been a part of her growth in music. Now the programs, varied, but always with the same purpose—to build up excitement so that the customers would spend—seemed sterile, simply the night after night repetition of Botti's bag of tricks.

It was the end of the evening. The players were putting away their instruments. Suddenly, standing beside her, a young man . . . tall, clear blue eyes, suit of tropical weave, worn very well.

"Jo . . ."

"Mary! Hurry and get yourself ready. I'll be waiting outside. Got my car."

"When did you get home, Jo? Why didn't you let me know?"

"Only just arrived in town. I wanted to surprise you, anyhow. Worth it, too, to see your eyes."

As he met her outside, he said, "You're my girl, all right. No doubt about it . . . looking the way you did when you saw me."

His car was a roadster, top down, open to the stars. He drove expertly through traffic, out over the Queensborough Bridge to Long Island.

"It's nearly six months, Jo," was all Mary could think of to say. Words were crowded out of her mind by the overwhelming, joyous sense of his presence. She had needed to have this happen, this evening.

Her two hands lay, half open, in her lap. For a moment Jo laid his hand in them. A little sigh escaped him. "I thought I'd never get back."

"How's everybody?" asked Mary. "The East nice?"

"Damn the East!" said Jo. "It kept me from you." His emotion surprised even himself. Not only had the going to the East kept him from Mary. The trip was related in his mind with some loss of security he had had before in his father. Dad's leaving Celly out there wasn't fair.

"But you're here now, Jo."

Jo parked the car on a narrow road which ended at a small sand beach. A great tree spread over them. In front of them, far away across the Sound, were the lights of Connecticut.

Jo's long embrace, his freshly shaved cheek, the slim, fine lines of his body. The hard core of Mary's being, untouched until now, seemed to give way. No dual allegiance, as she saw it now. Only warmth and increased vitality.

She did not know herself that Jo's love did not threaten her as Jim Sawyer's had, because Jo had no deep driving desire for work. So far, he had fitted his life to hers.

"Mary," said Jo at last, "our generation doesn't gloss things over. I know you can take what I'm going to say. It isn't going to be easy for us to marry."

"I know it, Jo."

He seemed older, more mature.

"I want you to get this straight," Jo went on. "I'm going to marry you, but not now. I can't do it without messing things up at home. Messing things up for us, too." He paused a moment. "I couldn't earn my living anywhere but in Dad's office. I'm not trained for work, Mary. Besides, it would hurt them too much."

Mary felt no wounded pride, and Jo had taken it for granted that she would not. She wouldn't have wanted to hurt her parents that way. As for the Tuttles not wanting her in the family, she understood that, too.

"I've learned a lot these last months," Jo went on. "Celly

stayed in the East. He is father's manager in Vladivostok."

"And Jane?"

"Home."

"For good?"

"Looks like it. We've managed to mess up Celly's life pretty thoroughly," said Jo. "He's a fine civil engineer—took honors in his class. He'd have won out, I think, if he hadn't fallen in love with Jane. I don't want anything like that to happen to you, Mary. I don't want you hurt . . . I'll find a way. For now, let's just go on seeing each other and be ourselves. Okay?"

"Okay, Jo."

"This clinches it, then. I got it in the East for you." Jo switched on the dash light, took from his pocket a ring of green jade set in soft gold.

37

YOUNG Jo laid his plan carefully. He was going to marry Mary Trencher. But he wanted none of the battle that Jane had run into when she had tried to bring Celly into the family. Jane's sharp antagonism had roused all his mother's fighting instincts to the point where she had used his father. That was what had shaken young Jo—that his father could be shaped to her purposes.

Jo knew his father. Given a chance to know Mary through work or in some relation to his business, his father, Jo believed, would like her, possibly back him up. He hadn't with Celly, but that was different. Celly was a man, not earning enough to support Jane as Dad thought was her right.

The plan he had in mind was growing, but it would take some putting over. Tom Breckinridge, who headed up the advertising department, had been discussing a big fall campaign. Calendars. Almanacs for the farmers. Advertisements in farm journals.

Piffle, thought young Jo. Same hoary old stuff. Tom needs a fire built under him.

For a long time he'd considered showing up the pompous Tom. Hadn't been worth his while, before.

Jo believed they might do something with radio. That was the latest way of advertising. Put on a good musical program. Something the farmers would like.

He came down to the office at nine one morning. At five, he was still there. He got all his data together—cost of time on the air, different hours of the day, cost of a small orchestra—that was what he was driving at.

A few evenings later, he told Mary his plan. "Would you help me get this across to Dad? If you'd talk to him the way you talk to me sometimes, I feel sure we could persuade him."

"Oh, I couldn't, Jo. What would he think I had to do with it?"

"Well, it's your background we'd play up. You know what farm people like and you know music. Only son giving swell idea," said Jo. "He'd think I was smart to have hunted you up."

"What about your advertising department?" From her work in offices, Mary knew how each department had to put itself over, was jealous of interference.

"I'll take care of that," said Jo.

"Perhaps I wouldn't talk as well as I do to you, Jo."

"Stuff!" said Jo. "How about tomorrow afternoon, just before your show? If I know Dad, he'll like what you say."

Jo was again at the office at nine. As soon as his father was through his morning routine of letters and dictation, Jo went in.

"Pretty early for you, isn't it?" said Jo Senior dryly.

Young Jo began without preamble. "Dad, I've worked out an advertising scheme. I've had an idea we ought to branch out a little, make a new appeal to the farmers. I find other big businesses are doing a lot with the radio."

"Yes," said old Jo. "I know that. Been all over it. But the thing is, not enough farmers have got radios."

"Hold on," said young Jo. "Take a look at these figures, Dad." He opened the folder he had in his hand, took out a paper.

Old Jo studied the sheet. "Where'd you get this?"

"Different places. Mail-order houses. Radio dealers. It shows a lot of farmers are buying radios." Young Jo saw, with pride, that his father was beginning to take the plan seriously.

"Umph," said old Jo, twirling his glasses on his thumb, as he did when he was thinking. "Pretty expensive, isn't it?"

"Not in the end, if it beats down sales resistance. The firm can afford it."

"That's what you think." Old Jo didn't believe much in his son's money sense. "Said anything to Tom about this?"

"Not yet." Young Jo knew Tom would be against his scheme. It wasn't only his father who had seen to it that he'd had nothing important to do in the office. Breckinridge didn't want him to become too useful, either. "I wanted you to get my idea first, Dad. Here's what I found out about the expense of it. You might look the estimates over."

"You seem to have got everything here, Jo." Growing in Jo Senior was a sense of wholly unaccustomed pride in his son, as he looked at the neat, competent survey. "Got any kind of a program worked out?"

"I'm coming to that. You remember that girl you met at the Chases' last winter—Mary Trencher?"

"Girl from Iowa, wasn't she?"

"Yes. You get the idea. She's from the farm country, and she's a musician. I hunted her up. Sounded her out on what farm people like. If you're going to be at the office late, how's for me bringing her around, along about five?"

"Well, you seem to have got it all planned out. No harm in thinking about it. Yes. Bring her around."

Mary liked Jo Tuttle Senior even better than she had the first time she had met him. He was wholly himself here

in his office. She saw the business shrewdness behind his affable manner.

"So you think I can use Beethoven to sell tractors to farmers," he was saying quizzically. "Why not something jollier? Seems to me a minstrel show would be more the thing."

"That's where you're mistaken, I think," said Mary. "Minstrel shows have been done over and over. After all, the farmer's literature is the Bible, in spite of the trash that's showered on him by salesmen who think they know what he ought to like." She stopped, a little aghast. Here she was disputing Jo's father.

But Tuttle nodded. "There's something in what you say."

"Don't talk down to them, then," she went on reassured. "My idea would be to present music simply and not as something highbrow."

"Umph!" said Jo. "It is highbrow. Everybody knows that."

"Suppose," said Mary, "you were to emphasize in your program something every composer and musician knows, that a great deal of what you call highbrow music grew out of the songs of working people, and their folk-tales."

Young Jo, sitting on the sidelines, grinned.

His father saw it out of the corner of his eye. "That would be just lovely for the Polacks and Swedes and Dagos," he said tartly.

"You're wrong there," said Mary. Her face, not actually beautiful with its broad cheekbones, its wide, strongly cast mouth, took on beauty when her eyes lighted up and her mouth lifted at the corners with humor and purpose as it did now. "Who does all the yelling in the galleries at Carnegie Hall?"

"Well, you win there." Old Jo had to concede that she had made her point.

"And there's one thing more, Mr. Tuttle. Remember that the greatest enemy a piece of farm machinery has got is the farm woman."

"What do you mean by that?"

"She wants things for the house and she fights against too much going into the farm. Some of this music will reach her." She rose to go.

"Well, perhaps," said Jo. His mind, never unreceptive to new ideas, was beginning to get hold of something from this girl. He liked the way she had talked back to him and he liked her intelligence.

After Mary had gone, young Jo said, "Well, how about it, Dad?"

"I'm not sure yet. Together, you've given me an idea about reaching the farm family, though." He leaned back in his chair, twirled his glasses by their horn-rimmed bows. "I'd see to it that I got the best, if I undertook it."

"What she said about farm women seemed smart to me," said young Jo. "Why don't you try to get a woman conductor for the orchestra?"

"There aren't any," said old Jo.

"Remember Vera Lichens? We met her at the Chases'. If she were a man, she'd be leading one of the best orchestras, and you wouldn't be able to touch her."

"That so? Lichens? Oh, yes. Fine woman. I liked the cut of her jib. I know your mother thinks she's a good musician, but I'd rather have a man. That is, if I decide to do it at all."

"Still, you might talk to her," young Jo urged.

Jo Senior thought about it for a few days. He hadn't planned to branch out quite so heavily, but it was Jo's idea and he'd like to use it. First thing young Jo had ever contributed to the business. That was a fine girl, too. Jo must have kept track of her after he'd met her at Steve's.

Once old Jo was sold on an idea, he wasted no time. He put out feelers to learn Vera Lichens' musical reputation in the city. The more he learned about her, the more pleased he grew.

"Jo," he said to his son, "your plan is shaping up. I find Lichens is high-line among musicians. She hasn't had much

popular recognition, but a little advertising will take care of that. And to people who are in on the know, we'll look pretty smart."

"If you can get her," said young Jo with a grin.

"Get her! Of course I can get her!"

He called up Vera Lichens' studio, made an appointment, went to see her. Studios weren't just in his line, but Miss Lichens had seemed to show a nice businesslike attitude to him when he'd talked to her on the telephone.

As he entered, he saw it wasn't at all the kind of place he'd expected. A large room, sparsely furnished, no soft fixings about—a grand piano and a few straight-backed chairs, some music racks. A place of work. It gave Jo the feeling that he could get right down to business.

Vera was deeply interested. "I think you have an excellent idea, Mr. Tuttle," she said. "A symphony orchestra, small, but good. And some fine singers."

Jo preened himself a little. By gad, it *was* a good idea.

"If we can come to an agreement on salaries for you and the players, I'll go ahead with it."

"For me?" said Vera. She could hardly believe her ears. The best she had hoped for had been to start as conductor of an orchestra in some small community.

Jo felt a little uneasy. She seemed to be considering, looking at him with clear, non-committal gaze. Was there anything in the way he had approached her that didn't appeal to her professionally? He'd got to have her. He cleared his throat. "Of course, you can name your own salary."

"Why, I'd be glad to leave that to you, Mr. Tuttle," said Vera.

"You'll do it, then?"

"Yes."

"Well, then, it's settled. I don't know much about orchestras. Keep it as small as you can and still have it a symphony orchestra. Give me an estimate, when you've made one. My son will handle the details."

"It will take time, of course, to organize a symphony orchestra, Mr. Tuttle."

"Take all the time you need," said Jo. "I want it to be good."

Jo sat in his office, going over the final estimates with Breckinridge.

"Of course," said Tom, at the end of the conference, "if you feel you want to do it, we'll put it through. But you won't get your money back."

"I'll risk that. I don't see why you want to fight this so, Tom."

Just then young Jo stuck his head in the door. "Steve's out here, Dad. Got time to see him?"

"Sure. Bring him in."

Breckinridge went out, not waiting to see Stephen. Why did Jo's boy suddenly take this initiative? It threatened the careful structure Tom was building.

"Hello, Steve," said Jo Senior. "What's on your mind this morning?"

"Oh, I was going by. Thought I'd run in and see you." Now that he was here, Stephen found it hard to speak of Doogan and the publicity. He had played for time, but Doogan had been after him again and again, and he had finally decided to approach Jo. "Doogan asked me, by the way, if I'd say a good word to you about the kind of publicity he's been doing for us."

Jo's eyes lost their kindliness, looked hard and cold. "We don't need Doogan," he said. Then, in his usual pleasant manner, he added, "We're going to do a fine piece of advertising for ourselves. Nice stuff. A symphony orchestra on the radio. Want to interest farm women, through them the men, of course. Young Jo's doings." Tuttle spoke with pride.

"Pretty grand for you, isn't it, Jo?" said Stephen.

"Yup," said Jo. "It is. But young Jo's kind of making us step around, these days."

His pride was obvious. Evidently Jo and his son had made up their differences over Celly.

As Stephen got up to go, Jo laid a hand on his shoulder. "Wish we had you over here, Steve."

He's softening his refusal of Doogan, thought Stephen. Well, why should Jo be so high and mighty? Doogan was only shrewd. And Jo himself couldn't have built up the business he had without shrewdness.

"I was too late," he told Doogan, the next day. "Tuttle's already made his plans."

"That so?" Doogan's eyes narrowed. "Did you find out what they are?"

"Going on the air, I believe," said Stephen briefly.

"Well," said Doogan impatiently, "but what's his scheme?"

"Naturally he didn't outline it to me." The quizzical look he turned on Doogan hid, he hoped, the distaste he felt.

"Hell, Steve! If you'd been awfully keen about putting me over to him, you wouldn't have waited until he'd made other arrangements. Or maybe you aren't the salesman I thought you were." He turned and went out.

38

MARY left Vera Lichens' studio walking on air. Movement seemed necessary to express the freedom suddenly given to her. Vera had asked her to play in the Tuttle orchestra.

I'm good enough for that, she thought. For just a moment she had been fearful, wondering if young Jo had maneuvered to get her in. No, she decided. Vera wouldn't have me if she didn't think I was up to it. The radio, and a place in a good orchestra.

The whole city looked different to her. It didn't seem to be in a rush this afternoon, now that she wasn't. She cut across to Fifth Avenue, walked in the leisured crowd.

I'm going to have leisure. That tense, unnatural rhythm

to which she had been bound so long, seemed to loosen. She'd have some evenings free, time to herself. Vera would work her musicians hard, of course. But that would be different. Effort and growth. The creative in Mary stirred again.

She wished she could see Jo, but there was no chance until dinnertime. She must tell someone. On an impulse, she went into a drugstore, telephoned Jim Sawyer's office. They had started out together in this city. Jim had got her the chance to play at Botti's. They'd always rejoiced with each other over their breaks. Jim would be glad to know.

"Jim? This is Mary."

"Oh, hello." He seemed far away and very busy.

"I've got a break, Jim. Thought you'd like to know."

"In music?"

"Yes. In radio."

"Bully for you, Mary," he said, when she had told him.

"Everything all right with you, Jim?"

"Fine."

"What's new?"

"Nothing to speak of."

She waited a little. "Good-by, Jim."

"Good-by, Mary."

Mary felt a little flat. Well, she told herself, I should have known better than to call him.

She wondered if Hester were home. "Could I drop in for a while?" she asked, in answer to Hester's "Hello."

Mary looked about the room where she had first met Jo. As Hester came in, she jumped up. "You can't guess what's happened!"

"My dear!" said Hester, her eyes shining, when Mary had finished. "What an opportunity! And for Vera, too. How did Jo Tuttle happen to choose her?"

"Well, he met her here, you know. And his son knew her work—I think he proposed her." Mary tried to say it off-handedly.

"Has Vera got all her musicians yet?" asked Hester.

"I don't know. I think so," Mary answered her.

When Mary had gone, Hester felt an excitement she could not still. A war horse smelling the smoke, she said to herself with a wry smile. But of course I'm not good enough now, and Vera knows it.

What Vera did ask her to do was something quite personal. "It's entirely my own idea . . . nothing to do with Mr. Tuttle. I need an honest critic," Vera told her. "I want someone to sit in at each rehearsal and flay me after it's over. Will you do it?"

"But Vera, do you think I can? I've not studied conducting."

"You've played with orchestras. You know music. You will be for me a highly intelligent audience, criticizing me before, not after, each performance."

"All right, Vera. I won't spare you. I'll be as severe as Mary's been with me," Hester said.

In those strenuous weeks when Vera was whipping her orchestra into shape, Hester did not miss a rehearsal. She listened, she judged, she evaluated, and she battled with Vera afterward. Stimulating, wonderful weeks, with all her faculties focused on a task. She led two lives this winter, one in the studio, the other Stephen's. Like the blades of shears opened, they diverged more and more.

Sitting among the guest audience in the glass-enclosed broadcasting studio, Hester watched the Tuttle orchestra assemble for its first program. Vera stood before them, her hands raised. The first, fine strains of the music. Hester's attention did not waver throughout the performance.

This beautiful arabesque of sound was the completion of a structure wrought through years of grueling work. I might have done it, she thought. But she was not envious of Vera; not if she and Stephen could win through to understanding again. Reaching out to Stephen, who sat beside her, she put her hand on his.

"It's over," he said, smiling down at her.

"Let's go and speak to Vera," said Hester, rising.

Among the small audience invited for the first evening of this important broadcast were officials of the studio, friends of the Tuttles—a richly dressed crowd, Mrs. Tuttle moving among them.

"We're so delighted," Hester heard her say, "that we can give this beautiful music to the public."

Jo Senior had joined the group around Vera. He wrung her hand. "Good stuff," he said. He went over to where the musicians stood, in twos and threes, talking, congratulating them, singling out Mary. "Well, young woman, how do you suppose Iowa liked it? Come over here, I want you all to speak to Mrs. Tuttle." As he pulled the group in his wake, young Jo whispered to Mary, "I feel a little like the mouse that brought forth a mountain. Let's do a sneak out of here, after you speak to Mother."

Mary nodded.

"How do you do?" said Mrs. Tuttle to Mary. Ice could not have tinkled more coolly than her voice. She turned aside, bowed perfunctorily to the other musicians.

Once outside, Jo and Mary did a little jig down the long corridor.

"It did go well, didn't it, Mary? I was scared, though, when I thought what if you should make a mistake."

"Why, Jo! I might have. But I never thought of it."

They walked toward one of the small open squares of the city, leaned back against a railing, looking up at the sky, grey and wintry.

"Let's see," said Jo. "You're established now with a good orchestra. Dad knows you and likes you. Where do we go from here?" he added, suddenly.

All the time Jo's scheme had been taking shape, through the weeks of strenuous effort, they had been carried along by the idea that somehow such a real accomplishment would hold in it the solution of their personal problem.

"Well . . . where do we?" answered Mary. The scene they had just left had made her understand better. Mrs. Tuttle, seeing in the broadcast the aggrandizement of herself . . . the musicians to her only the instrument by which she attained it. The Tuttle wealth had brought this thing to pass—that was all it meant to her. Mary didn't believe that playing with the orchestra was going to get her anywhere with Jo's mother, although Botti's, certainly, would have set her back.

"Jo," she said, turning to him, "all this subterfuge . . . I wish we didn't have to. I don't see where it's going to get us."

"I know." His clear eyes were suddenly miserable. "But what else have they left us?"

Jo had seen the meeting of his mother and Mary. He feared now that there would be no way to win his mother's consent. Jo loved his mother. How be the first to rend the family apart?

39

"MR. DOOGAN calling you, Mr. Chase," said the impeccable voice of Stephen's secretary from the box at his side. "Shall I put him on?"

"Put him on."

"Hello, Steve."

"Oh, hello, there, Doog." Stephen controlled the irritation he always felt these days when Doogan called.

"Meet me for lunch?" asked Doogan. "Got something important to talk over with you."

"Okay," said Stephen briefly.

Doogan led Stephen to a secluded part of his club dining room. "Never know when you're going to be overheard, and this is between us," he said.

"Look, Steve," he began, after they had given their order. "I understand Stackpole, up at the Bronx warehouse, is on the way out."

"Hadn't heard it," said Stephen in his most non-committal manner.

"Well, you have now." Doogan was tired of handling Chase with gloves.

"What does that mean, Doog?"

"It means we want him out."

"We?" asked Stephen coolly.

"Yes, we. Middleton and I."

"And then?"

"I've got a man for the job."

"Does he know how to run a warehouse?"

"As well as you know how to run a merger."

So, Stephen said slowly, "Don't think I can see my way to recommend that, Doog. Stackpole would be a hard man to replace. As long as I'm working for the firm, I've got to see that they keep their best men."

Doogan leaned across the table. "Who'd you say you're working for?"

"If you mean what I think you mean," said Stephen, "I'll throw the damned job in your face."

"Okay." Doogan looked him over coolly. The fingers of his left hand patted softly on the table. "If you think you can afford to. You ought to know, particularly in view of that resignation of yours from the Oil Company that you haven't said much about."

"So?"

"There are two kinds of resignations. Either an organization suggests it, or a man has another job in mind. You didn't have, I believe. Look, Steve. We built you up and we can tear you down." He stopped, waiting for an outburst of anger from Stephen. An angry man, he knew, was at a disadvantage, gave himself away. But, suddenly, he saw that on Stephen's face there was no expression of any kind. A mask seemed to have dropped over it. His lids drooped, half-obscuring the calm eyes. In no slightest way did he show what he was thinking.

The guy's smart, thought Doogan. Doesn't show his hand. Valuable, if I can find his price.

"Look, Steve," he went on. "You get our man in, and you won't be sorry."

"I judge the man you're speaking of has special abilities you think would benefit us."

"He's wise to the live poultry game. There's money in it for us all, if we handle it right."

Live poultry? thought Stephen. So we're playing in with that racket? He knew the devious, twisted deviltry which went into the mulcting of farmers and small dealers, that had been going on for years in this city. It was an open secret that the gangs had chosen the foods of the city to exploit. "Take a little handling, won't it?" Stephen said. "Would you mind if I let you know in a day or so, Doog?"

"Sure, sure. Take all the time you want, Steve," said Doogan, affable again.

Back in his office, Stephen let go the anger which, before Doogan, he had held in check. The pup! he thought. The crawling little pup! I ought to have thrashed him!

But gradually his rage left him. He tried to think his way through the labyrinth of intrigue and favor on which his position rested. It had not been his abilities which had brought him this job. Doogan had got him in here because he'd wanted a man whom, in the long run, he could use . . . a man trained in the ways of big business, efficient, but without the powerful connections of big business. A man who, if he were to keep his footing, must let himself be used.

Was Middleton in on this? Doogan had said, "Middleton and I."

If he is, thought Stephen, my job's done for, unless I consent to play along. If Middleton isn't in on it, could I possibly outwit Doogan, keep Middleton's confidence?

Stephen had no illusions about Doogan's power to undermine him. He knew from experience how easily reputation could be destroyed.

He reached nervously for his pipe, dropped it back into his pocket, unable to pull steadily enough to light it. Into his mind came the thought of Tim and Hester. His lips narrowed to a fine, white line. He got up, started for Middleton's office. Right now, he said to himself, I find out where he stands.

Middleton waved him to sit down. "Something on your mind?"

"Had lunch with Doogan today," said Stephen briefly. "He seems to think we need a stronger man up at the Bronx warehouse."

"Oh? How does the idea appeal to you?"

"It would mean putting Stackpole out. He's a good man."

"Stack's getting old. I've thought myself, for the past few months, that we might do better." Middleton leaned forward to take a rosebud from the vase on his desk. He fastened it in his lapel. "This man Doogan's recommending for Stack's job, I understand, is much better informed about modern aspects of the poultry and green vegetable trade."

Well, there it was. Middleton was on, all right. Stephen waited.

"I knew, of course, when I turned the warehouses over to you that you'd see for yourself where things could be better managed." Middleton picked up a sheaf of papers. "This'll interest you, Steve. We've cracked that Michigan block at last. We can run the independent out, now."

No direct word . . . no written word . . . that would ever implicate either Middleton or Doogan.

Humiliating and terrible to Stephen how all these months these men had looked upon him . . . simply as a down-and-outer, to be used as their tool when they needed a tool. There was nothing for him in a world where prestige had been taken from him. The Company had always said that it never paid a man to resign.

He didn't stay overtime tonight. He'd got to get away, where he could think the thing over.

Snow was falling as he went out into the street. In the country, on a night of snow, a man can close his house door, feel himself in a citadel of safety, the whirling white flakes hissing and drifting across the doorstep. Even the apartment-house dweller can share some special sense of safety, watching the snow pile upon the cornices outside his window, blow off in great gusts as the wind comes down the electric-lighted caverns of the streets.

But Stephen, closing the door of his apartment, felt no safety.

Tim ran to meet him. "Hi, Daddy!"

Stephen picked him up, kissed him.

Tim shook his head. "No more kisses," he said. He laughed, putting both hands on the sides of his father's cheeks, patting them. Unable to endure being still any longer, he wriggled down, rushed toward his mother. "Hi, Mummy!" he called in passing.

"Can't you help him get rid of some of that energy?" said Hester, laughing. "He's run Anna and me ragged this afternoon. We couldn't go out, because of the snow."

"So it's rough-house you want," said Stephen, tumbling him over and over on the rug.

Anna's carefully browned beefsteak was cut thick, the way he liked it, with baked potatoes and green salad. He must manage to eat, must manage so that Hester wouldn't notice.

But later, before the living-room fire, Hester glanced up from the book she was reading, saw him staring straight ahead, a cold pipe clenched in his teeth.

I can't any longer let him fight out alone whatever's wrong, she thought. He must tell me. But how should she reach him? She had tried so many times before.

She must try now. "Stephen," she said quietly, "what is it? What is it that's troubling you?"

"Why, nothing," he said casually. "I was thinking over a little business, that's all."

She felt a sense of deep discouragement, seeing his guards go up. Suddenly she made up her mind. She'd shock him into some revealment of himself, if necessary, but she would not let him keep this remoteness. "Stephen, look here. We can't go on like this . . . you living your own secret life, I living mine, no real confidence between us. It's things like this that lead to divorce."

Stephen's head went up with a jerk. "What do you mean? You? I? Hester, I'm living for you. That's what you never can see. It's because of you I'm thinking of doing this thing that revolts me." He had not meant to say that, but it was too late now.

"Do you think that's going to make me happy? Do you think I'm happy now?"

"Well, would you be any happier if I did the other thing and lost my job?"

"I cannot say, Stephen, unless you explain. I'm not a luxurious, idle woman to be kept by you, and to have decisions made which involve my happiness without my own consent."

Stephen looked at her. To guard her from his difficulties had become an obsession. He stared for a moment into her steady grey eyes. His tongue was dry in his mouth. At last, moistening his lips, he spoke. "Perhaps you have a right to know what I'm up against. Doogan didn't get me my present position out of friendship, Hester. He wangled me in there for a purpose. I know now what that purpose is. Doog makes his living by his wits. In China we called it squeeze, in America it's called a racket. Doog's somehow connected with the poultry racket and so is Middleton. It's come to the point where they expect me to play along with them."

"But you can't do that, Stephen."

"Well . . . it's done, constantly."

"But not you, Stephen."

"Then I'm out." Stephen got up, pacing the floor.

For a moment Hester did not speak. "It would be hard,

Stephen. But you've got more experience than you had when you came from China."

Stephen flushed. "I can't explain, Hester, very well. It's mixed up with my leaving the Oil Company. Doogan hinted—" he stopped. "It's no use going into it."

"Stephen, you've got to tell me."

"Well, then, you've asked for it. Remember, Hester, I wanted to protect you, but you won't have it."

"Go on, Stephen."

"The Company asked me to resign. That's why I came home. That's what they intended to do from the start. They didn't want me to resign just after that business with the oil tanks, when I got hurt. That was no time to fire a man."

"Oh, Stephen! Why didn't you tell me?" He had not, then, based his decision to come home on anything she had said. He had come with the same urgent need to keep her in ease that he had had in the beginning. He had not voluntarily resigned. In all her efforts to fathom the change in Stephen, that had never occurred to her. "How could they, after what you had done! It's outrageous!"

"I was a fool not to realize they would as soon as they could. Doogan's smart . . . somewhere he got the story. The merger didn't give me that big job because of my ability and past record, as I thought, but because they knew they'd have a whip over me. What chance have I got, if I quit, to get another position? After all, we've got to live."

"There's Jo, Stephen. He's your friend. He knows you, he won't need any recommendations. Every time I've seen him, he's said something about wanting you."

"How do I know? Maybe he only wants me when he sees I'm in the money. If I go to him in need of a job, how do I know he'll still want me? I'm afraid to put his friendship to the test."

For a moment Hester wasn't sure herself. She had a vivid picture of Jo—affable, yes, but his eyes could be guarded, even cold. Then she thought of Jo telling her how he had

hunted to find his friend Purcell a place he could fill in spite of his deafness. Wouldn't he realize that it was as important to help Stephen? "You've got to take the chance, Stephen."

"The only thing Jo ever offered me was out of New York. Probably half the salary I'm getting now. How would you feel about that?" He remembered her vigorous defense of him in Shanghai . . . and then her leaving him alone.

"I'm willing for you to take even a greater cut in salary than you mention, and I'm willing to leave the city. I won't deceive you. It would be hard, but not for the reason you think. Not because I'd miss a lot of things you provide me with. Not because I'm soft, Stephen. There's something I must say to you. Maybe I'll never again get the courage to.

"When I married you, I understood I must never tamper with the hard purpose that goes with work. I knew how to work myself. I was a musician, a good one. You remember when the Company gave you your first chance on your own, you hesitated on my account, because we'd be the only ones at the station. You pictured it for me before I decided . . . the prairie stretching out to the steppes, the little house inside brown mud walls, the two grey tanks standing over us, our duty to guard them night and day. But it was your first chance to make good, as the Company said. And I was as glad as you were, because I understood that to touch your work was to touch your self-respect.

"Then something happened. I've never been able to talk about the death of our first baby." Hester, for a moment was unable to go on. "How shall I tell you, Stephen? The baby was living within me . . . when you went off to the city on business for the Company. The fire, you remember . . . you had oil stored near it. I needed you, and you weren't there. And then when you did come and lean over me, you told me the baby was born dead. I couldn't help but think, if you'd been there—"

"Hester . . . what else could I have done?"

"Nothing, my dear, I know now. But please let me finish.

I want you to understand. After that, something twisted in me kept wanting frustration. I found a peculiar pleasure in being submissive to your business career and I began to love the soft comfort your money got for me. Then later, when I was carrying Tim, you nearly lost your life in another emergency for the Company."

For a moment Stephen saw it again, as vividly as if it were happening. Only the thin iron gates of the compound between him and the mob. The making up of his mind, going out to arbitrate. The moment of triumph when he had thought he might swing the mob, save the tanks. Then the terrific noise of explosion, the hot spray of oil, his clothes afire. . . . Once more he lived in the exultation and anguish of that night.

Hester's quiet voice went on. "You were a hero, before the men, before everyone. But the Company didn't like that. Being a hero raises a man out of the treadmill. I saw what they were doing to you. I even urged you to resign. And then I was afraid we might be poor. I told you about Tim's coming, knowing you wouldn't risk being out of a job. I had lost feeling for the integrity of your work.

"I've learned again to work, Stephen. This time I'll see the thing through with you. I'm no longer afraid of not having luxury. Go and see Jo, take whatever he offers you."

They sought each other's arms, the silent embrace all either of them could bear.

At last, thought Hester, I've straightened things out between us, been wholly honest.

Stephen's conflicting emotions tumbled about within him. The long silence over the death of their child at last broken . . . many things in their life together explained. For a moment he had a sense of real freedom. The protection and ease he had built about Hester were no longer necessary. He realized suddenly, though, that she had made it impossible for him longer to justify what he did under the pretext of giving her that protection.

After all, as he had said before, they had to live. He was not certain that the strict integrity he had once demanded of himself was possible. By resigning from the merger he could put actual dishonesty out of the picture. But how necessary subterfuge would still be to him he did not know.

He knew he was going to use some subterfuge in going to Jo.

40

AT A small table in a far corner of Jo's favorite club, Jo and Stephen sat the next noon. When Stephen had called Jo, asking if they couldn't have lunch together, Jo with his usual insistent hospitality, had urged that the luncheon be his. It was a good luncheon. English mutton chops, hashed browned potatoes—a dish that they had often enjoyed together in their youth—black coffee.

For Jo, the hour brought just one more of the many responsibilities of his growing wealth. In the warm glow of alcohol, food and friendship, a little more of the fabric of his business was woven. His business built from Tuttle brains, his own, his father's, his grandfather's, he was beginning to hope, his son's. Inherited wealth—the duty of each generation to increase it. The holding of property a definite obligation, first to the family, then to those who had a right to claim his friendship. Money of necessity controlled their actions—that was what he was trying to teach young Jo.

For Stephen, the hour was portentous. On how he handled Jo, the future of his family depended. He was going to speak to Jo from the vantage point of his present job. Honest or not, he dared not let Jo know that the bottom had fallen out of his place in the merger. He was going to use this job as a fulcrum to get a new one. Even with a friend like Jo, prestige counted.

He waited until the edge was off Jo's appetite. Then he

said, "I'm not altogether satisfied, perhaps you've guessed, with my present position. You've often suggested I come over to you. How about it, Jo?"

Tuttle hastily swallowed his last bite of chop. "It's about time," he said. "I've wondered when I could get it across to you that I don't like to see you mixed up in anything Doogan has a hand in . . . and he's got it in over there, all right. Maybe I'm prejudiced, but Doogan's never been my kind. He's a heel, Steve." Jo's shrewd gaze rested upon Stephen. "No, you don't need to tell me anything."

Stephen wondered whether he'd looked as if he'd intended to, because he hadn't.

"I know, of course, that they've paid you a good deal. That kind of work draws down a lot of money," Jo went on. Again he looked at Stephen. "I can't meet them, naturally."

"I didn't expect you to," said Stephen.

"How'll Hester feel about that?"

"That's all right, too."

"Well, then, we can get down to brass tacks. There's just one place where I can use you now, Steve. It's the Kansas business. I've never taken over that plant. I hadn't the man I could trust with it. It's in bad shape. I've got to foreclose. The manager and owner is a fine old Middle Western gentleman, but he's been sick for a long time. In his absence things have gone from bad to worse. It's the kind of job I believe you're fitted for, from what you've told me of your work in China, where you were used to bringing back a business that was run down. Does the idea interest you?"

"Yes. I've always been interested in it, ever since you first mentioned it."

"Then you'd better talk it over with Hester."

"I can answer now for Hester," said Stephen.

"Better be sure," cautioned Jo. "Means a lot for a woman like Hester to leave New York." His mind went back to

Flora. Until they had left Chicago, Flora had made him pretty miserable.

So Jo had never been just talking. I might have known it, thought Stephen. And all along there was one other man I could have trusted, if I'd stopped to think. Stackpole couldn't be bought, or they'd have bought him. Not that that would have helped me out any, but it would have been good to know.

"It's not a business that will ever grow into anything very big, probably," Jo was saying. "I don't want you to get any false ideas of the future. We've only two markets—neither colossal. Alcohol for drugs, and for toilet preparations. But there should be a fair increase in business, with all this prosperity. The amount of perfumes sold has doubled in the last five years. Likely to double again, and of course a great deal more alcohol will be used if our medical centers keep on growing."

I wonder, thought Stephen, if Jo's ever considered the possibilities of power alcohol. I won't say anything now to him. But other countries use it. Maybe sometime this business can be made bigger than he thinks. Aloud he said, "I'll take it, Jo."

"That's settled then," Jo said. "I'll get the wheels going to foreclose on the Plant. When things are in order, you can resign your present job. Until then, I'd hang on. One never knows what's going to happen in business. But first of all, let me know what Hester says when you put the actual going to Kansas up to her."

"I'll call you in the morning, but I know that'll be all right. I can count on Hester," said Stephen, as they stepped out of the elevator.

Stephen walked the few blocks back to his office. It crossed his mind that Jo might be doing this just to give him a break. That's a little too optimistic, he said to himself, especially as Jo isn't doing anything philanthropic in the way of salary.

His own acute business sense told him that Jo was testing him out by means of that small salary. I believe he wanted to see what my standards really are after a year and a half of Doogan's tactics . . . whether I'd make a real sacrifice to get clear of that crowd.

He took a grim satisfaction in the kind of resignation he was going to be able to hand in this time.

41

HESTER looked about the apartment. She would not begin to tear it to pieces until Mary left this afternoon.

Hester today found as deep satisfaction as Mary ever had in the beautiful accuracy of music, its mathematical precisions. Human relationships, in some way she could not have explained, were trued up by the ordered beauty of music.

In all the need for action and decision of the last days, Hester had not allowed herself to consider the momentous change in her own life this going meant. No longer the companionship with Mary, their work together. The strong, professional skill of Vera Lichens, a vigorous factor in her own development, the constant initiative of criticism, she would be deprived of that, too.

At the end of the hour, Hester said, "Mary, I haven't told you. It's only just decided, but Stephen and I are starting out again."

"You mean going back to China?" said Mary soberly.

"No, not that, but pretty far, or so it seems to me." Hester smiled. "Perhaps it wouldn't to you. Kansas. But it's a new world for us. Stephen's going to be manager of a business for Mr. Tuttle."

"But you've got to be in New York for music!"

"You mean, then," said Hester, "music is just a profession? Not a personal enrichment?" Mary's protest shook her a little. Did music belong only to the professional world, los-

ing actuality outside it? Did its significance lie only in the performance of the few applauded by the many?

"I don't know what I mean," answered Mary, "unless I mean I don't want you to go. I . . . somehow . . . I don't know, with you here, it seems . . ." She saw Hester's puzzled look. "Hester, Jo Tuttle and I are engaged. We've told no one. I wouldn't tell you, if you weren't going away. Why I tell you now, I don't know, except the things that stand in the way of our marriage wouldn't seem obstacles to you."

"No, they wouldn't," said Hester. She wished she could say something that might help, for she saw Mary was troubled. But what could she say? She felt helpless before the extreme delicacy of the relationship between man and woman. She believed it was art itself in its final resolving, but how tell another? How tell Mary that such resolvment came through hard, grueling effort, more often missed than attained? Take herself and Stephen . . . they had contributed to each other's undoing with no will but to strengthen each other. They must try again, until trust became security.

The subterfuge of Jo and the integrity of Mary . . . how would they be welded together?

The two women sat for a long time, talking little, realizing, now they were to be separated, the strength they found in each other's presence.

In this place where she had value, Mary's apprehensions subsided. Thinking of Jo, she saw that he must have time to graft his life into hers before he could break his other bond.

"I'll miss this room, and you," Mary said at last, getting up to go.

"We *have* been good for each other, haven't we?" said Hester, laughter in her eyes. She kissed Mary.

•

PART TWO

•

AS STEPHEN and Hester, Tim between them, drove west, there were signs of spring. In the towns forsythia flared forth from bare stems. Outside the towns, green was just beginning to sharpen the faded, fawn-colored fields. Spring was withdrawn again in the higher altitudes of the mountains. But when the road angled down from the last ridges of the eastern coast range and stretched itself out, dipping and rising to fit itself to the low hills and wide, shallow valleys, they saw the winter wheat in bright patches spotting the earth, black as it was drenched with rain.

The road leveled out to the prairie floor. The sun shone. The air was filled with the chitter and clatter of tractors moving into the wind, away from it, across it. Ahead lay the straight, shining strip of asphalt, squaring the counties off to the squared pattern of the farms repeated over and over—a windbreak, trees bent by the wind, a white farmhouse, a windmill, big barns, a silo. Beyond, endless fields. A windbreak, a white farmhouse, fields, the pattern of rich black furrows repeated to the flat horizon.

Traveling the wide stretches of country before they reached Chicago, they came to a great oil refinery—grey tanks covering acres of land, their flanks shining in the slanting rays of the afternoon sun. The tall towers of stills made a pattern against the sky. Stephen had never before seen oil tanks in such mass.

Farther west as they neared each city on their route, the substantial concrete towers of grain elevators rose in phalanxes, taller and larger granaries than man had ever built before, giving a look of stored prosperity to the land. To Stephen they recalled the low grain towers of Manchuria, built of spiral

matting unwound section by section in the spring, as the bean harvest was taken away.

Stephen went astray in the unfamiliar streets of Kansas City, but finally he found the route, and they were on the long, straight road that stretched out toward western Kansas, toward the Pacific, straight across America's two thousand million acres of land.

The sun sank below the level horizon, leaving a pale after-glow at the base of the empty expanse of blue sky. Not far now, the little town of Colfax, where Jo Tuttle's Alcohol Plant was situated.

It was later than Stephen had counted on. "I wanted to get in before dark," he said to Hester, letting the car out a little.

Twilight came, blending the newly turned furrows into one soft, continuous grey-black sheet. Sudden puffs of wind lifted the fine topsoil, sending it scurrying along in wisps of dark mist.

All at once Stephen slowed the car. "There's the Alcohol Plant, Hester. That's the way it looked in the pictures Jo showed me."

Above the plain and the city's low, surrounding buildings, Hester saw a tall, white shaft. The car passed before it into the first mean streets of the town, the houses little more than shacks. Stephen drove slowly to avoid children playing in the streets, afraid that in the dusk a child might dart out in front of the car. Then the street lamps came on, and they saw peering at them the black sloe-eyes of Mexicans and Negroes; a thin scattering of blue-eyed, white-skinned Anglo-Saxons.

Quickly, as is the way with cities, the street changed into one of better dwellings—small, box-shaped houses with neat lawns. Men in shirt-sleeves were raking their lawns, sprinkling grass seed on bare spots, the rhythmic sweep of the sower's arm shortened to a mere twist of the wrist to fit these small plots. On the sidewalks, the children raced back and

forth on roller skates, making a sharp, staccato click of metal on the hard cement.

At the center of the town where two business streets crossed, the bank bulked large on one corner, light shining dimly on the doors of its vaults, the hotel opposite it.

"Well, I guess we're here," said Stephen, lifting Tim into his arms, helping Hester out.

There was a flutter of interest at the desk when they registered.

"Chase? Certainly, Mr. Chase." The hotel manager spoke affably. "Rooms have been reserved for you."

The outgoing manager of the Plant had made the reservation that morning, confirming the rumors which had run up and down the town for weeks. A big New York concern had bought the Plant, and was sending a man out to run it. Rumor had it also that a lot of new capital was to be invested, which might boom the town.

Word that the new manager had arrived was passed quickly from the desk to the evening habitués of the hotel, standing or sitting about the lobby. They surveyed Stephen and Hester with curiosity not unmingled with suspicion. Something different about these newcomers roused the caution, instinctive in all men, to erect barriers against those who are alien. Too, the town held a grudge against Tuttle for foreclosing on Hobson, when his death couldn't be far off. And the town, as a whole, had never quite liked the idea of alcohol being one of its industries.

"Look like foreigners," said the hotel manager to his clerk, as the Chases followed the bellboy across the narrow lobby.

One pair of friendly, even eager, eyes rested on them. Dr. James Hodges, the town's most popular physician, had come into the hotel to see a patient. As he got out of the elevator, he saw the two standing by it, a little boy holding to a hand of each, and he guessed who they were. Strangers were not common enough to remain unidentified long.

Wonder where they've lived besides New York. The man

wears tweeds like an Englishman, the doctor thought admiringly. Himself an Englishman, he hadn't dared wear them here. Neither will this man, if he makes good in the town, Hodges said to himself with a grin.

He found it more difficult to place the woman. The luxurious kind, he thought, noticing a fastidious perfection of manner and dress. And then he wasn't so sure. Well, I wonder what they make of Colfax. Hope they'll be friendly, was his final thought, for they look interesting.

Born and reared in England, Dr. Hodges had come to America after the War of 1914-1918, seeking a chance to begin over. He had found it. He had a place for himself in this community. Now it was home to him. But new people . . . there was no denying that the sight of them had set his foot to itching. He went out to his car, thinking of places far away from Colfax.

2

STEPHEN had expected there would be some word at the hotel from Hobson, the outgoing manager-owner, who had been notified of his coming. Hobson must have expected him, as he had made reservations for him. He'd have word in the morning, undoubtedly. Stephen dismissed the matter, went about getting a cot put in their room for Tim. But when ten o'clock came the next morning and he had heard nothing from Hobson, he grew restive.

"I believe I'd better take the initiative," he told Hester at last. "I'd thought we'd look around for a house, first. I mean, get you started. Go with you to see the real-estate people."

"I can hunt them up myself. You don't need to wait," Hester answered, seeing a kind of mending of his spirit in his eagerness to be at work.

As Stephen walked into the office at the Plant, he found it

empty except for an ample, middle-aged woman sitting at one of the two desks. "Good morning. Where can I find Mr. Hobson?" he asked her.

She regarded him somewhat sourly. "Mr. Hobson doesn't come in ever. I'm Miss Wilson, the bookkeeper."

"How do you do?" Stephen held out his hand. "I'm the new manager, Stephen Chase."

"We weren't expecting you until tomorrow, Mr. Chase," she said uncompromisingly, completely forgetting the little speech of greeting which she had rehearsed for his coming. What's he doing here today? she thought.

"Oh, I'm sorry if I've mixed up plans," Stephen answered, sensing at once that his arrival had upset her. "But I wonder if you could get in touch with Mr. Hobson for me."

Miss Wilson could hardly give up taking him to task. Even if he was the new manager, he ought to let people know when he changed his plans. She just wasn't going to gloss it over. The men in the Plant treated her with such easy, matter-of-fact acceptance that she could not fail to recognize in herself the heavy, middle-aged woman they considered her. She'd meant to be stiff and unyielding with Mr. Chase, as she always was with Hobson and the others, to show them they couldn't wholly take her for granted. But the new manager's courteous manners had disarmed her unexpectedly. He has got a nice way, she thought.

"I'll ring Mr. Burton up," she said with a nervous flutter, telephone in one hand. "He's been kind of helping us out here, since Mr. Hobson's been sick."

"Mr. Burton says he'll be over as soon as he can," she told Stephen. "You want to go on in?" she asked, seeing him glance at the door leading into the Plant, from beyond which came the rhythmic beat of machinery.

"Why, yes, I do," said Stephen. "It's kind of you to think of it. Will you tell Mr. Burton where I am when he comes in?"

Miss Wilson looked after him, pleased and gratified. She

hadn't made such a bad beginning after all. But in one corner of her mind she was a little uneasy. This new role of graciousness made her unsure of herself.

As Stephen opened the heavy fireproof door at the back of the room, the throb grew more powerful. He stood for a minute, taking in the scene. Grey light came through high-set windows, falling on black machines cemented into the grey concrete floor, each in its just sufficient space. Light from a naked bulb hanging from the ceiling focused his attention on the biggest machine of all, a great Corliss engine. The thick leather belt of its seven-foot flywheel glistened as it spun under the concentrated light.

He liked the abstract atmosphere of the place, the clean precision of the machinery. The familiar smell of oil made him feel that he was at last where he belonged, brought back vividly the state of mind once instinctive to him that he was useful, his work to some purpose. He realized that this was the first time since his return from China that he had felt so. Ironically he thought of himself in his first job in America—the receiving room at the fur storage plant, the piles of expensive furs, the strong scent of stale perfume underlying the faint, unpleasant odor of dead animals.

A young man, cotton waste in one hand, long-spouted oil can in the other, rose from behind the big engine.

"Hello," said Stephen. "Good engine."

"Hello," said the young man. "She's a dandy, all right." He eyed Stephen. "You the new manager, by any chance?"

"Yes."

The two stood watching the engine's perfect execution, the piston rod's precise forward and backward thrust, the great flywheel's silken whirl. Red painted bands accentuated the horizontal glide of the pistons, the circular movement of the flywheel.

"Good paint job, too." Stephen squatted down to watch the engine more closely.

"I put them red stripes on," said the man, grinning.

"Took some kidding about it. The boys said I was giving her too much make-up. She looks okay, though."

Stephen liked this young man. Evidently he considered his engines as not unlike a group of slightly eccentric humans whom he tended with amusement.

"Seen anything of the new manager?" a voice called.

"Here I am," said Stephen, rising from behind the great Corliss.

Burton, stocky, well-dressed, inclined to be dapper, walked across the room, grasped Stephen's hand. "Sorry I wasn't on hand to meet you. Didn't expect you until tomorrow." Turning to the other man, he said, "This is Mr. Chase, the new manager, Beb. Ronald Bebbidge, our chief engineer. Like to go on around the Plant, now you've started?" he asked. "Give you a chance to meet the men and see the operation."

This Burton seems to be pretty familiar with the place. But I wonder, really, if he didn't know I was here, thought Stephen. He studied the nonchalant tilt of Burton's shoulders as he charged ahead through the boiler room into a great space where three mammoth cylindrical tanks lay on their sides, up a ladder to the catwalk criss-crossing their tops. Agile as a cat, he dodged around intricate webbings of pipes, Stephen following as best he could.

"This's the cooker deck," said Burton. "Hello, Pat. Meet Mr. Chase, the new manager. This is Pat Horan. He's boss up here."

A stocky Irishman, stripped to the waist, shook Stephen's hand, but his eyes traveled quickly back across the big recording thermometers built in above the tanks. "Cut her down a little, Mat," he called. "We're getting ready to drop the mash, Mr. Burton."

"We'll not bother you, then," said Burton. "Up there's the laboratory where they test yeasts," he said, indicating a door at the top of narrow steel steps. "Keep two chemists busy all the time."

Stephen understood very quickly that Burton was presupposing he had the technical knowledge to grasp at a glance the complicated operations of an industrial alcohol plant. With a wave of a hand toward the tall, grey tanks standing in the still house, Burton said in passing, "Water and alcohol distilled here out of the mash. And this is the center of the Plant. The chief distiller operates from here." He led Stephen along iron catwalks to a bare, half-enclosed space, where a lean, angular man stood before a huge instrument board. Stephen could see only the man's back and the thinning crown of his black hair.

"Stretz." Burton touched the man on the shoulder. "Like you to meet Mr. Chase, the new manager."

Stretz swung around. He was an unusual figure, thin, narrow-chested, and very tall, but with the heavy abdomen of a stout man. It's the way he stands, thought Stephen. He's all out of plumb.

"Pleased to meet you," said Stretz. His eyes were hostile, whether toward him or toward things in general Stephen could not say.

As they climbed back down the ladders, Burton said, "He's the most valuable man in the Plant. If you can keep him, you're set. Got to have a smart man here, handling such a delicate process."

Before Stephen could ask any questions about Stretz, Burton had changed the subject. "Grain delivery's made on the platforms outside the Plant," he said. "The elevator carries it to the mill house at the top of this building. You can go up there by yourself, or I'll send someone with you, if you like, later on. Never go up myself unless I have to. Don't like height."

Back in the office, before they began to examine the records, Burton took a sheet of paper from the desk. "Here's a list of employees. You've met the most important—Stretz, chief distiller, Pat, the cooker boss, Bebbidge, who runs the engines. There's Seaton, the head chemist, and Jones, his as-

sistant. We skipped them. Thought we didn't have time to go up there. Altogether, there are about fifty men, counting the unskilled labor—the men who handle the grain as it comes in. Some of them are good, some not so good. There's another man, who's God Almighty in the Plant, that's the government inspector. Perhaps you noticed a lot of pipes are painted blue? Those are the ones that carry alcohol. They've all got Federal seals on them." He got up, closing the desk. "Suppose we go and get some lunch."

Stephen felt himself getting angry. He didn't like this cavalier way in which the Plant was being turned over to him. He knew the process—yes. But the thousand and one little things peculiar to this particular business only someone familiar with it could tell him.

After the waitress at the hotel coffee shop had served them and was out of hearing, Burton's manner changed. He spoke in a different tone, as if he had been waiting for this moment to get down to business. "Of course, I haven't any actual connection with poor old Hobson's Plant. He's a very sick man—can't live long. For the last eight months or so, I've been dropping in whenever I could spare time from business of my own. Act of friendship, you understand. I don't know why I'm telling you, for it's no concern of mine."

Stephen wondered if, actually, it wasn't—the man seemed so intimately connected with the Plant.

"But here's a good steer for you. Of course, with an alcohol plant, in a small town like this, there's bound to be a lot of gossip and intrigue. You can't deny that the business has its possibilities." He looked at Stephen with an understanding leer.

"I don't see it that way," said Stephen shortly.

"Then there's only one essential thing to worry about, and that's corn prices," Burton went on suavely. "When corn's up, as it is now, you can't break even. I don't believe I can do you any good here," he went on, "and if it's all right with you, I'll be leaving town this afternoon. I've had some pretty good

offers lately from other places. Just now, I'm considering something with a big outfit and they want to see me right away. Okay?"

"Certainly. If you can turn things over to me in that time," said Stephen a little curtly.

"Of course. That's understood," Burton answered.

3

TED JONES, the assistant chemist, had come out of the laboratory as Stephen and Burton left the Plant for luncheon, and strolled along the catwalk to the lighted control board. "Well, what do you think of him, Fred? Burton didn't pay us the compliment of bringing him up to the laboratory. Or maybe the guy can't climb steps."

"Plenty of chemists kicking around, that's why," Stretz answered.

"Okay, okay. We know *you* can't be replaced. Come on, give us poor second-raters the dope." Jones reached for a cigarette, then remembered he couldn't smoke up here. "What's he like?"

"All right, I guess," grunted Stretz.

"Think he's going to be tough?"

"Keep your shirt on," said Stretz, bent over his board. "Wait a while. See how tough he is."

Bebbidge stuck his head in the office door. "Oh, hello, Blanche. All alone?"

"Uh-huh. Big shots gone to lunch," said Miss Wilson shortly.

"Quite a guy, isn't he? Knows machinery."

"Does he?" she answered. "And my opinion is, he knows his way around, too."

"How'd you figure that out, mighty mind?" asked Bebbidge.

"Compared to the men around here," Blanche said acidly, "he certainly shines."

"Ouch!" said Bebbidge. He grinned. "Think you're right, though, at that."

Late in the afternoon, after Burton had finally turned things over to him, Stephen went again through the buildings, carefully going over each step in the process of making alcohol, from the time the grain was thrown into the endless chain of buckets in the elevator until it reappeared clear, white alcohol.

He hadn't met the chemists, so he stopped in at the laboratory. Seaton, the head chemist, rose to shake hands with him. His eyes looked straight into Stephen's. Different from the other men, this man—about thirty, a good deal of the student in his thin, sensitive face.

He's absorbed in his job, all right, thought Stephen. Aloud, he said, "I'm going to depend on you to carry this business up here until I'm more wise to the Plant."

"Why, I'll do my best, of course," said Seaton quietly.

"I'll count on you then." Stephen felt he'd got his first toehold.

The door opened, and a young man somewhat cocky in his manner, to Stephen's way of thinking, came in. Seaton introduced him. "This is Jones, the assistant chemist. Ted, you haven't met Mr. Chase yet, have you?"

Jones came forward, greeted Stephen, shaking his hand cordially.

Last of all, Stephen climbed the swaying ladders to the mill house at the very top of the white shaft, where Burton had said he never went. There was a lidless trapdoor like the trap in a lighthouse tower that leads to the lamp balcony. He stepped through into a square room, lofty and bare, its only furniture three wooden knees sticking out of the floor. The windows were shuttered. One electric bulb lighted the place. The wind was blowing outside in a heavy

roar, swaying the high tower. Above the incessant hum of fans in the cyclones sucking out dust, he could hear the buckets rising, an endless chain in the elevator shaft, carrying grain, dumping it into the hoppers.

He stood contemplating the intricate, difficult business ahead of him—the study of Plant and men. Now he realized Jo had risked a good deal in giving him this job. He owed a lot to Jo. He must run this business so it made a reasonable profit for him. That was what Jo expected and the only way he could repay him.

The metallic beat of grain continuously falling tapped insistently on his absorption, finally driving all other thoughts from his mind. That continuous flow of plenty. . . . He listened to the hard running of the corn as once he had listened to the hard running of the beans into the matting grain towers, the measure of China's harvest.

A sudden sense of the great stretches of prairie he had just driven across came to him. The once unbroken plains brought under the plow in a century, a new civilization built up. The old country of China he had watched at first with hope, had failed to achieve what its civilization had promised. His own land—what would it make of its coming maturity? A moment he stood, a man returned from a far country.

4

FIVE. Five-fifteen. Five-thirty. Hester waited in the hotel room for Stephen.

"Listen, Tim. Is that Daddy?" she said, thinking she heard Stephen's step in the hall.

Her mind went back and forth over the day's happenings. Soon after Stephen had left, the night maid came in, in answer to a call which Hester had left earlier for someone to look after Tim. She was a thin woman with a tired face.

"They told me at the desk you'd like to see me."

"After being up so long, perhaps you'll find it too much to take care of my little boy while I go out."

"No, ma'am. I'd like the money."

She had been the first figure to take shape in the pattern of the town, with its houses set against a day of high wind, with clouds scudding across a very blue sky.

Hester's straw hat had blown away at the first street corner, coming to rest on the running-board of an old Ford parked at the curb. A man in blue overalls picked it up and handed it back to her. "Spring wind's bad this year, and it's full of grit. Stranger around these parts?" he asked.

Then the real-estate office and Swift, the agent.

"Not much in your line, just now," had been his words. "People moving to town these last years, what with the big corn prices. Got one house that might do you, though, up in the best section, too. Suppose we drive around and see it? What business did you say your husband is in, out here?"

Hester hadn't said, but she told him then.

"Oh. So you're the people who're taking over the Alcohol Plant. Hear you've bought in on it."

Hester suspected he had known who she was before she had told him. His inquisitive eyes were those of the man-gossip, as well as the shrewd dealer. Swift was set into the pattern of the town, taking shape hour by hour in her mind.

He had driven his car deftly down the narrow aisle between the parked cars on either side of Main Street. "Darn it! If the Chamber of Commerce don't do something about this double parking, we're going to be driving on the sidewalk," he had grumbled.

More gracious streets, wider, bordered by soft maples and cottonwoods. The yellow tails of the trees' blossoms lay in tiny drifts along the red-patterned brick walks, the houses set back from the streets. Old houses in an old town. All old. No building going on.

Swift had stopped the car before a tall brown house, built in the period of ornate porch rails and cupolas. Its lawn sloped away from it on all sides, hard and green and bare, broken only by an occasional round or crescent flower bed, and one iron stag.

"This is the kind of house I see you living in, Mrs. Chase. Suits your style and your husband's business . . . have to think about that, you know."

The key grated in the lock and the door swung back into a hall, a long straight flight of stairs at its rear. To the right were old-fashioned double parlors with high ceilings, long windows, shutters folding back into the casement. On the left, a dining room and a kitchen, all done in dark wood. Above, four rooms, and a bath with a bathtub set into its place with wainscoting boards stained walnut to match the rest of the woodwork. Aloof, imposing, the house spoke of a definite standard of living, a definite code of manners. Was it the code of the town?

"Haven't you anything else?" Hester asked. The rent was too high for them to consider, even had she wanted to live in such grandeur.

"Nothing so classy. There's a smaller house a few streets down. It's just outside of the best district, though." Swift did not seek to hide his disappointment when she expressed a desire to see it.

A story-and-a-half white frame house was what he had shown her, as definitely New England as if it had stood in a Massachusetts town. Set far back from the street, it nestled into a little hollow. A tall cottonwood leaned over its roof, and three white birches stood together outside a bay window. There seemed to be something secret and personal about it. Who, Hester wondered, had created it and then left it?

"Of course, the rent's pretty high, because of the amount of land in this garden, and the owner's awfully pigheaded about this house. Lets it stand empty, rather than lower the rent."

"Who is the owner?" Hester asked.

"Fellow calls himself an architect. Lives in the East, now. Came out here several years back, made a big flourish, opened an office and built this place for himself and his wife. But he couldn't make a go of his business."

"How'd your house-hunting come out?" Stephen's words broke startlingly into her thought.

"I didn't hear you come in, Stephen," she cried, jumping up. "I found one. I want you to see it. But the rent is a little higher than we planned."

"Weren't there any others?"

"Yes . . . one. But it's very ugly, and it would take more help to keep it, and the rent is even higher. I'd like you to look at it, Stephen—the one I spoke of first, I mean."

"Let's take Tim and go have a look at it. But you think this man Swift put up the price because he thought you liked it?" he said, as she finished telling him about the agent.

"Yes, I'm afraid so. I gave myself away," said Hester ruefully.

They drove down the street looking for the place.

"This corner is where we turn, Stephen. No . . . the next. Oh, there it is!" she exclaimed. "The shrubbery hides the house from the street."

"Isn't it a little run down?" Stephen was looking at the walk, the bricks tilted unevenly with grass growing between them.

"Yes," said Hester. "The garden is, and everything, a little."

Mansard roof, white clapboards, green blinds. The front door recessed, a fan-light above it. They could hear the branches of the cottonwood brushing the shingles of the roof.

Stepping on the shadows of the white birches lying long and thin on the path that led beneath them, they walked around to the wide bay window, held their hands like blinders to their eyes, looking in.

Tim edged in between them, cupping his small hands in imitation.

Opposite them was a fireplace, paneled doors on each side. The millwork on the mantel was plain, with merely a few simple groovings. In the darkening spaces of the room, so soon to be given over to night, they felt a deep serenity, whether communicated to them because of some mathematical ratio of height and width, proportion and balance about the house, making beauty and therefore a sense of rest, or because the house was set in the hollowed curve of earth, they did not know. Whatever it was, this house held something that made them want to live in it.

5

THE next afternoon, as Hester was getting Tim ready to go out, Stephen telephoned her. "I've got the house."

"How nice, Stephen!"

"I made him come down on the rent," he added.

"Oh, Stephen, you *are* smart."

"Well, not very," he answered dryly. But she could detect the pleasure in his voice as he went on. "Do you suppose you could go up and see what repairs are needed? We ought to get started. There was a bill of lading for the furniture in this morning's mail—it ought to be here in a few days. I'll come around as soon as I can get away from the Plant and pick you up."

Tim had just waked from his nap and was a little cross when she thrust his hands quickly into the sleeves of his sweater, eager to make the inspection, get the house in order as soon as possible. We need to get away from this hotel, especially for Tim's sake.

"Mummy, no! Not hurry," and he grasped the little red automobile Stephen had bought him on the way west, his favorite toy at present, in both hands.

"Take it in one hand, Tim, dear," begged Hester. "Help Mummy."

But Tim was not in the mood to help. "Walk," he said, when he saw her getting his go-cart ready.

"Oh, I'm afraid it's too far, Tim. Let's take it along, anyway."

He lagged at the first corner. With a hauteur only Tim could manage, he accepted Hester's offer to wheel him. But when they reached the recessed doorway of the house, he demanded, "Down!"

"All right, dear, we'll walk." Taking his hand in hers, she went around the house, the key to the back door, for which she had stopped by at Swift's office, in her hand. Through the empty spaces of the lower floor she went, walking slowly.

"Here's where we'll eat, Tim, and here's where we'll sleep," she told him, going into a big room to the left of the hall behind the living room. She tried the taps in the bathroom beyond. They dripped. The kitchen sink looked pretty old. The floors, painted black and stippled with white, after the fashion of Cape Cod, looked worn. I think, though, was her conclusion, that they only need a scrubbing.

She came to the stairway leading up to the half-story above.

Tim sat down on the bottom step. "You want to carry Tim?" he asked in his most engaging tone. "Tim tired."

"Why, Tim! You wanted to walk all the way here and now you're tired just walking through the house," Hester protested. "You're too big for Mummy to carry."

"Not big," said Tim, his lip beginning to tremble.

She stooped, lifting him in her arms. It's so many new thing upsetting him, she thought.

Tim laughed. "Horsie, get up!"

Hester set him on his feet at the top. "There," she said, panting a little from the climb and his weight. "You're all dusty behind, Tim, from that dirty step. Let's not touch anything up here, it's very dusty," and she gave him a little affectionate pat.

The two rooms under the eaves had dormer windows. There were a few discolored places on the floors, indicating leaks in the roof. Surprising how little there's to be done, considering how long the house has stood empty, she told herself. But for some reason all her very real pleasure in the house was slowly filming over with the unaccountable flagging of her spirit.

She sat down on a little stool the owners had left behind, leaned against an upright.

"Don't sit down, Mummy." Tim scuffed his feet. "Dirty house." His tone held censure for a house that had not kept itself clean.

Through the low window she could see beyond the shingled roofs of the town the prairies sweeping in wide curves to the horizon. Something within her took fright. There was no security for her near to such wide stretches of land. Less than three years ago she had fled from the plains of Asia across these very stretches to the city which held her security.

Her eyes rested on the thin line of roofs between her and the prairie. A community small and personal. Her whole married life, except for those three years in New York, had been spent in tiny, ingrown business communities in China. In that final debacle, when the Company had discredited Stephen, the prying interest of the community had been used as a whip, slight but stinging, upon them. In the sheltered safety high in the apartment house in New York, she had been private and free. If she and Stephen were to make a home here in this town, they must be so accepted by the community that its hand would not be raised against them if they were threatened with failure. This town, so commonplace in its exterior, had been critical of the architect, a wholly outside person. She knew it would be equally critical of Stephen and of her.

All very well to tell Stephen that work had roused in her the creative energy which did not flag. She had left behind the very materials out of which her work was made. Memories

rushed up before her. Mary and she playing together. Vera Lichens standing before her orchestra. Herself, listening, intent, entirely concentrated on detecting the slightest flaw that might mar harmony, tone, or rhythm, watching Vera's hands in their expressive, delicate direction of the instruments. Fatigue deeper than any bodily fatigue flowed over her.

She heard Stephen hallooing from down below.

"We're coming," she called down to him.

"Have you been all over the house? I'll make a list of the things to be done, and then I'd like to take you over to see the Plant." His voice sounded alive and animated, as it had not for a very long time.

Hester feigned an animation, sufficient, she thought, to meet his.

But in the car he asked her, "Tired, dear?"

"Oh, not very. Perhaps, a little. Why do you ask?"

"I don't know . . . something about you."

As they drove along a side street, Hester saw for the second time the narrow and high shaft, sheathed in galvanized iron and painted white. She realized when she entered the building what was not apparent from the street, that the shaft was backed by a series of buildings, great room after great room. Everywhere there were tanks. She seemed to be walking in a grey gloom of their steel and concrete.

A black figure on one of the catwalks above them, looking curiously foreshortened and triangular in shape, attracted Stephen's attention. "Hello, Seaton," he called. "You still here?"

"I wanted to finish some tests," the man answered.

"Feel like climbing up that far?" Stephen pointed to a door, high up, reached by a series of narrow steel stairs, steel catwalks. "I'd like you to meet Seaton. I think he's going to be one of the men I can really depend on."

"Oh, yes," said Hester, glad of any excuse to get away from the overmastering presence of those warm, steaming tanks.

Stephen picked Tim up. The suspended stairs resounded

under his tread. Tim, looking over his father's shoulder, could see through the lacy network of the catwalks. As they went higher, he looked over the safe support of his father's shoulder. He even dared look down, securely held.

The tanks reared their rounded tops up through the spaces between the catwalks, but Hester found the air fresher up here.

Seaton and Stephen bent over a rack of test tubes, the younger man explaining the special work he was doing. "I've an idea there's a shorter process."

Hester walked slowly between the tables, showing Tim the fascinating mess of bottles, carboys, shelves full of labeled tubes.

"I'm a good boy," said Tim, keeping his hands at his sides, his fists tightly clenched.

Seaton overheard him, left his work for a moment, went over to some boxes, lifted the covers. "He can touch these," he said, smiling a little shyly at Hester.

The boxes were full of corn. Tim, wholly content, let it dribble through his fingers.

Hester studied Seaton as he returned to his bench. She could see that he was a little flustered, a little taken aback at their sudden appearance. There was uncertainty in the presence of his chief, tinged with a tentative hopefulness that the boss, like himself, would see the value of this work. The young Stephen whom she had married—he had been like this.

She turned to the window that filled one side of the room. Out of the deepening dusk, the silvered, rounded sides and tops of great blending tanks crowded close upon her. The silvered tanks—for many years a symbol to her of a power which, so far, they had not escaped. The hard road of Stephen's comeback suddenly seemed to have led to a *cul-de-sac*, Jo Tuttle's Plant only another closure, holding them into another failure.

"I guess I'll go down, Stephen. Tim and I'll meet you at the car," she said in a low voice. Stephen nodded, hardly noticing,

absorbed in what Seaton was showing him. She opened the door, stepped out on the catwalk with Tim's hand in hers.

Tim looked down through the lace-like walk under his feet. Far below were lights and dark spaces. He dared not put his foot forward. He cried, "Mummy!" in a small, frightened voice, but the quite-all-watchfulness of his mother was not there. She did not answer. Frantically he pulled back. With his free hand he clasped the railing tightly and screamed.

As that shrill, agonized scream reached Stephen, he thought Tim must have fallen. He got himself to the door, he didn't quite know how, Seaton close behind him. He saw Hester kneeling by Tim, trying to quiet the sobbing child. He saw that the height had frightened Timothy.

"Here, Tim, Daddy will carry you down." He tried to speak in his natural tone, but his voice shook a little as he gently tried to loosen the child's tight grip on the rail. "What you scared of, Tim? You're a big boy. These are nice sidewalks. Sidewalks for men." In a low, steady voice, he went on, "Look, here's Mr. Seaton. He runs up and down here sometimes, when he's in a hurry."

Tim's sobs began to quiet.

"If you let your father lift you up, Tim, then you can look down, just as if you were a big man right now," said Seaton.

Tim hesitated, then held his arms up to Stephen. In his father's arms, he felt big and strong, his face on a level with theirs.

Hester watched his eyes lose their look of fright, grow big with interest and delight as the two men put the work of the Plant into a story for him. The rough cloth of Stephen's coat sleeve touched her wrist. Had not Timothy all the afternoon been taking in insecurity from her? She looked at them beginning to go down now, Tim's soft pale hair mingling with his father's greying hair, as Tim laid his head close.

No surface acceptance of this life will do, Hester was thinking. Timothy is almost a part of me yet. He has no security except mine. Perhaps Stephen, too.

As they stopped in the office on their way out, Hester took in the two oak desks, the files, the old swivel chairs, the white walls unadorned except for a large calendar advertising perfumery. Not much of a place, compared to the luxurious, carpeted office with its sleek mahogany, which had been Stephen's at the merger. To most men it would typify a loss in power and prestige. She wondered if Stephen had undergone any such experience as she had just passed through. If he had, he had kept it to himself, as she must. To confide her doubts to him would, she knew, weaken her, weaken him also.

Seaton, on his way home, tried to make valuation of his new chief in the light of the afternoon's happenings. How deft and gentle he had been with his little son! He could be very understanding with his own. Would he show the same understanding of the men under him. It didn't always follow. Some men who were kindest to their families were the most relentless employers. Mr. Hobson was an indulgent father, but with his men hard or soft as seemed best for his own interests, Paul had always felt.

6

DURING these first days at the Plant, every faculty Stephen had was concentrated on the job that confronted him. Teasing his mind into alert action was an old problem in new guise—the bringing back of a business that was not paying. He had done it often in China, but there it had been bringing back business after the catastrophes of famine or war. Here he faced a failing business in the midst of prosperity.

He had the feeling that in some ways this was going to be the more difficult task. Prosperity was not going to aid him in the vigorous discipline needed to rebuild this business. He had learned in the fur storage firm that men resented a tightening up that took away from them small indulgences which

they had come to consider their rights. The value of hard work was just now at a discount in America. This spring the country was obsessed with the knowledge that riches could be acquired without work. High and low felt a hurrying rush each to get his while the getting was good. Stephen knew from his own experience. Only a flagrant threat to his own honesty had stopped him in the mad scramble to get rich. Spending was the mark of a man's abilities. If he had judged the set-up rightly, discipline was one of the things he would find had been ignored in the Plant.

The office files Stephen found in good order. Whatever Miss Wilson's manners might or might not be, she knew her job. It made no difference whether he asked her for a report of this year's figures or those of six years back. She would ruffle over her files a moment with her chunky little fingers, pull out the paper he wanted, lay it on his desk, and eye him with suspicion until she got it back. Fortunately, he, too, liked papers in their place, and so having read it and made his notations, he would return it to her carefully.

Blanche, looking at his desk free of any clutter, said to herself, He's a lot tidier than Mr. Hobson. But, I don't know, he seems to be hunting for something. It's upsetting.

"What do you think, Miss Wilson?" he asked her one day. "What do you make of these two sets of figures? Here's a yearly report showing smaller sales and larger profit than we're making now. I'd like you to figure in grain prices for that period and see if you can find out why."

"You mean me find out why?" she asked.

"Yes. You've been at this longer than I have," Stephen answered.

A flush rose in Miss Wilson's middle-aged cheeks. He's consulting me. What'd you know about that? As she passed the mirror that hung at the back of the office, she took a hasty glance at herself.

Skittish as a young colt, Stephen thought with an inward grin. But we're going to get along.

He found he could rely on her. He sometimes thought she knew more about the Plant than any man in it.

"Now, look," she said to him at the end of the week. "I guess I get what you're trying to do. For a long time I been wishing we could tighten up the loose ends around here. You take electric light bulbs, for instance. We buy them by the bushel. Portable lights, too. A man wants one at home, he just takes it along. He hadn't ought to do it. There's lots of things like that."

Stephen noticed that she never let any of the men in the Plant down. Miss Wilson saw employee and employer as two separate and antagonistic organisms. The men might rag her, make her fighting mad; she never broke her code. But order, system . . . those the Lord had dropped down from heaven, written on tablets of stone.

The Plant's slack, was Stephen's verdict. Each department's running about as it pleases. No wonder they weren't making any money. But I see no evidence of any underhanded business. If Si Burton did anything of that sort while he was pinch-hitting for his friend, he had it well covered.

7

"YOU'LL have to give me a few days," Swift insisted, when Hester urged him to hurry the repairs on the house.

They were three days of rain, which rejoiced the farmers coming as they did just after the fields had been sown, but they bore heavily on Hester's fighting reserves.

At last the sun shone, and the repairs inside the house were completed.

"I's the best cleaner and the best cateress in dis town," the colored woman recommended to Hester by the hotel manager told her. "I's so busy I can't give you more'n two days. But I's a fast worker. I kin do lots in two days. You won't know dat house when I gets t'rough."

Hester found that fat Jessica had not overestimated her abilities. She was already through scrubbing the hall, was well across the living room when Hester arrived with Tim.

"I sho' was glad to see dis old Bronson place rented." Jessica rested her huge rump on her heels a moment, after wiping up the line of grey water edging the cleansed area of the floor. "Queer lookin' floors, but dey always nice when dey clean."

"They're beautiful!" exclaimed Hester, looking at the sheen the black floors, feathered with white, were taking on. She went from room to room opening windows. The cold spring wind, the sharp sting of soap dissolving in hot water were good smells. She could see Tim outside, dashing excitedly about. Never before had he had such freedom. First he did not venture from the walk. Then he began making little forays farther and farther into the shrubbery. He was stooping now, touching the wet earth with one tentative finger. Evidently he had found it all right, for he sat down, patting it with his hands.

"Tim, dear," Hester called. "Don't sit on the ground. It's too cold."

Obediently he rose, his feet and hands heavy with mud. He surveyed the mud clinging between his fingers, used his other hand to scrape it away. A little frown of perplexity gathered between his brows when he found that now both hands were sticky.

Hester went to his rescue, getting the scent of wet earth as she stooped to clean the clods from his feet. By the path, here at the back of the house, a clear lavender line was showing. Looking more closely, she saw that a bed of crocuses bordered the walk. They stood straight, their petals opening, showing the yellow stamens within. The tissue-thin cauls which had sheltered them underground were split and clung withered to the stems.

Suddenly Hester stood immobile. What was that fragrance in the clear spring air? "Why, it's like *kuei hua!*" she thought.

Going deeper into the garden she came upon a bush fragrant with flowers. She buried her face among the small, white blossoms, trying to recapture China's autumn in all its poignant beauty. The great wild olive trees, with their thick, shining leaves, the tiny clusters of yellow flowers, their perfume that stirred the senses, were called back to her by this small, spring-blooming tree here in America.

"It been two years and dis house ain't never been rented." Jessica, not stopping her steady scrubbing, spoke as Hester re-entered the house. "Mist' Bronson wouldn't want it to stand empty."

"Why did they go away?" asked Hester.

"Ain' no buildin' goin' on round here. Ain' been a house built in Colfax, 'cept'n dis one, in years. He wanted folks like Mist' Evans . . . he de bank pres'dent . . . he wanted Mist' Evans to build a new house, kinda like dis'n, a plain house. But Mis' Evans, she don't like plain houses. She wants somep'n folks can see." Jessica went on scrubbing. "Mist' Bronson he say a house ain' for show. Dey was gentle people, Mist' and Mis' Bronson was."

Powerless were Jessica's words, indicating the town's cool reception of the Bronsons, to stir Hester to foreboding today.

Out in the garden, Tim felt a queer new sensation, a dim idea of somebody who was quite himself. When the presence of Hester had gone away, he didn't want to follow it. "You're a big boy," they had told him. A big boy. Tim was a big boy. The bushes stood way over his head. He went into them. He couldn't see the house, couldn't see anyone. But Tim was a big boy. Deliberately he sat down on the ground, put his hands again on that strange surface. Not like sand in a sand pile, where you shut your hand and it wasn't there. This you held firmly. He could feel its nice coldness where he sat on it. He went to work.

"I guess I'll have to find Tim," Hester told Jessica. "He's so quiet and I can't see him."

"You ain' goin' to have to watch him," said Jessica. "He

got his own business. Anyway, dey done bringin' you' furniture. Good I got dese floors done."

So Tim, enchanted with what he was discovering about himself, lay down undisturbed to try the earth, crossed his knees, let his foot wave, the way he had sometimes seen Stephen wave his.

Through the spring sunshine, two men, their backs bowed under the weight of Hester's piano, came along the walk, in through the doorway. The man in front, crouched under his load, raised his eyes, much as a hunchback would. "Where you want this, mum?" he asked.

"Here, I guess," answered Hester, motioning to the space between the bay window and the door into the bedroom. The apartment grand Stephen had given her during the year of their great prosperity, just filled the space. Across its keyboard fell the shadow of the birches.

Jessica came to look, her hands spread out on her ample hips. "Now, ain' dat some elegant pianna, Mis' Chase! I never see one like it." She wiped her hand carefully on her apron, reached out her black forefinger with its cream-colored cushion, touched a key, drew it away quickly.

"What's matter, auntie?" one of the men asked her, setting down a chair. "Did it bite?"

"My gracious, no. It sound like a bell."

"Do you play, Jessica?" asked Hester.

"No, but I listens."

The men brought in tables, chairs, beds. Under Hester's direction they rebuilt the home they had taken to pieces in New York. The prideful boast of the company they worked for was that they kept the continuity of life for America's restless millions.

"Look at that," said the boss mover. "We never even disturbed the kid's toy." From a corner of Stephen's big chair, the yellow bill of Tim's blue duck stuck out.

When the men had finished and gone, Hester looked about, critical of the result. The furniture which had crowded the

New York apartment seemed to leave these rooms almost bare. Her quick eye saw many additions, large and small changes, which would make the rooms more comfortable. Then she remembered she must be careful of expense. Stephen's salary was smaller than it had been for years.

Jessica wandered about in childlike enchantment. Forgotten her boast of how much she could do in a day. Jessica's comments made Hester see anew the Chinese things she was so accustomed to. They were beautiful in these New England rooms. Odd, the one so ornate, the other so austere. And yet, she reflected, the colonial houses had been built around Eastern treasures brought back by the clipper ships.

"Mis' Chase, dis black man settin' cross-legged . . . what he?"

"That's a Buddha," answered Hester. "He's a Chinese god. I lived in China, once, you know," she added, seeing the disapproval in Jessica's face.

"'Mongst dem heathen? What for you got dey god?"

"I saw him so often in China. He means China to me. I mean, I like to look at him."

"He's powerful quiet-lookin'," said Jessica, mollified.

Now the nostalgia for China Hester had felt in the morning, took her again out of this quiet house. She could feel the soft matting under her feet in the temple guest room, on her wedding night. The little bells of the priests tolled at intervals as they prayed to Buddha, somewhere in the mysterious recesses of the temple. This small Buddha which she had now she had bought the next day.

Without any pain now, she could think of China. It was as if the happiness of her return to understanding with Stephen, made real to her today as she put together their home, had sensitized experiences—too precious, she thought, to be allowed to fade into oblivion.

Stephen came up the walk toward the house. Just as he had been leaving the Plant, he had got Hester's message not to go back to the hotel, telephoned him by Jessica on her way

home. Through the open door, he saw Hester coming to meet him, Tim following like her shadow. He could see that Tim had been newly scrubbed. Bet he's been up to his eyes in dirt. This place was going to be good for Tim.

Silently they went into the hall. Tim lifted his feet, swung from his parents' hands, letting them carry him, then pulled away, running ahead of them into the living room. "See, Daddy, see me jump!"

"Fine," said Stephen.

Stingingly beautiful was the sensation he had of coming home at last. No longer the transient house, the transient job. He put his arms around Hester, drew her close.

Tim, getting no further response, eyed them for a long moment. Then, head down, like a small battering ram, he drove between them.

"Eh, son, you'll upset your mother." Stephen disentangled the child's arms gripped around their knees, picked him up. "I'll rough-house you, if that's what you're looking for." He tossed him into the air. Down Tim came, into his father's outstretched arms, their faces close. "Now, let's see you jump!" Stephen didn't want Tim to miss the thrills of appreciation for his first accomplishments.

"I've got to go back to the Plant this evening, Hester," he said, when they had finished dinner. "They came to me just as I was leaving to say something had gone wrong with the last brew of 'beer.' It's all got to be drawn off and destroyed."

"Is it something serious, Stephen?"

"No . . . happens once in a while, Burton told me. I just want to be there to check up a bit."

When Stephen had gone, Hester washed the dishes, standing by the sink in the growing dusk. She went at last to hunt through the bedding piled on the couch for Tim's sheets and blankets. She spread the cool sheets over Tim's mattress. Outside, a sudden shower sent a spatter of rain down on the roof.

When Tim was tucked between the sheets, he lay blinking

at the uncovered electric bulb over his head, refusing to let her put out the light. "Why don't we go home?" he asked her.

"This is home, Tim."

"No," said Tim, "not my home." Tightly he held her hand, reaching out through the bars of his crib.

"I'll sit by you, Tim, just tonight."

It was very strange for him, she knew. Never had he slept so close to the ground before. All the days of his life he had lived in high buildings, only the noises of the city known to him. Here in this low house, set so far back from the street, it was very still. They could hear even the movement of small insects in the tangled garden. Something rustled in the iris bed just outside the window.

"It's a lion" he cried, clutching her.

"No, Timmy, dear. Only a toad. Tomorrow I'll show you where he lives under the leaves."

In the glare of the light, Tim's eyes looked big and dark. "Please, Mummy, rock me."

Hester brought the low chair she had used when she had bathed and dressed him as a baby. At last he fell asleep in her arms. His legs, overlong for his years, hung down from her lap. His head lay heavy on her arm. She could feel now the place where his head had bumped against her thigh when he had driven himself between her and Stephen, as they stood together in the living room.

She laid him in his crib, drawing the cover well over his shoulders, for the night was cool, opened the window, stood listening to the unfamiliar sounds of the night. Like Timothy, she was not accustomed to being so near the earth.

ALTHOUGH Stephen had told Hester that an occasional loss due to bad yeast was inevitable, his knowledge of the general

slackness at the Plant made him feel that this loss might have been avoided.

Miss Wilson had felt so, too, and for once she had not been so careful as usual to defend the men. "We lost a brew just before you came. It hadn't ought to happen so often. That Ted Jones is too easy on himself. I bet he's the one to blame."

It's something I've got to handle pretty carefully, Stephen decided, on his way back to the Plant, or I'll be unfair to somebody.

Seaton was certainly a conscientious worker, but Stephen was inclined to agree with Miss Wilson that Jones was not. Too bad it's happened that I've got to make an example of Seaton's department.

When Stephen came in, they had already run off the bad brew, were disinfecting the tanks. The lights were on in the laboratory. Stephen went up and found Seaton at work. "Got any explanation," Stephen asked, "how this happened?"

"Bacteria get in sometimes in spite of all our care," Seaton answered.

"You have no other explanation, then?"

"Other than that, no." Seaton's honest face flushed.

"The reason I ask you," Stephen said, "is that in studying the records I find the Plant lost a brew just before I came. At that rate, we'd have to go out of business in a few months."

"I'll promise," said Seaton, "if it's humanly possible, it shan't happen again. But, honestly, Mr. Chase, it's something we can't tell much about." He thought, I'll have to watch Ted. He is careless sometimes. Perhaps I've not watched him carefully enough.

"Have you got other yeast ready for a new start?" Stephen asked, quite casually.

"We're going to work tonight," Seaton answered. "I'm expecting Jones any minute."

Just as I thought, Stephen said to himself. Jones skimps on his time. He ought to be here right now. He hesitated a moment, then decided he must act. "I don't want to accuse

anyone unjustly, Seaton, but I don't like the kind of work I've seen young Jones doing."

"You mean—"

"I mean just that. I think you can tell him for me when he comes in, that if this happens again soon, I'll have to let him go."

It was a full hour before Jones came into the laboratory. "Gee, Paul, I'm sorry I'm late. But I had a date."

"That's all right," said Seaton. "But, look, Ted, the boss has been in."

"He has!"

"Yes. And he thinks this spoiled batch could have been avoided."

"Oh, he does, does he?"

"Of course, it's my responsibility, but he said he thought you took your work too easily."

"Well, I like that!" said Ted. "Guess I'll go see him." He had a line he relied upon to get him through.

He entered Stephen's office, his cigarette hanging from his lower lip. "I thought I'd better come in," he began engagingly. "I don't think Seaton's made it plain that he couldn't help what happened. Paul—" he spoke with easy intimacy—"Paul's so conscientious that he shoulders blame for things he's not to blame for."

"So I've observed," said Stephen dryly.

"What I mean is, Mr. Chase, I thought maybe I could explain better to you how such things happen, as I don't have the final responsibility."

"Yes?" said Stephen. "You've never passed a batch or so of yeasts without completing the tests, have you?"

How'd he guess? thought Jones. He moistened his dry lips. "Oh, gosh, no, sir. I'd know better than to do a thing like that."

"See here, Jones," said Stephen, "I've got a strong suspicion you have, but we'll skip it this time. However, we can't have losses like this. If it happens again, I'll fire you."

Consternation spread over Ted's face. He hadn't been able to pull it off! His smooth line hadn't worked.

Stephen looked after him as he left the office, with peculiar satisfaction. He grinned to himself. Being cracked down on once in a while wasn't going to hurt young Jones a bit.

9

TED JONES drove with one hand, his arm around Tiny Johnson. At this rate, he'd hit Kansas City in a couple of hours, give her a good evening. He let the speedometer climb to sixty, to seventy.

"I can't keep this business up, Tiny. I can't stage a party every night."

Tiny turned her blonde head. Her eyes and mouth laughed up at him. "The competition too much?"

"Competition be damned! I've got to get rested up. I'll lose my job if I don't."

"What do you mean you'll lose your job?"

"Well, Chase isn't one bit easy. He's tightened up on us. Last night, when I went back for that extra work, he had me on the carpet. Says he'll fire me, if the yeasts go bad again."

"Why, the big stiff!" Tiny was righteously indignant. "Why blame it on you?"

"Well, he's either bluffing or he really knows that I'm half asleep some days."

"He's got you scared. How'd he know? He doesn't sit around in the laboratory, does he?"

"He seems to know a lot. I think he soaks things in through his skin."

"Nuts!" said Tiny. "Paul Seaton probably put the blame on you."

"Gosh, no, Tiny. Paul wouldn't do that. Now, look, Tiny. Either you've got to marry me, or we quit going together.

That's flat. You've dangled me at the end of your string as long as I'm standing for."

"Why, Ted Jones! I think you're horrible! I never dangled you. You've been right under my feet ever since you came to this town, so now!" Tiny moved away from him over to the edge of the seat. But when Ted made no move to draw her to him, she was a little frightened. She loved Ted, but it had been such fun to have him so anxious, and he was such a good spender. Life was very complicated.

Tiny was pretty, with her ash blonde hair and her eyes that opened very wide and wonderingly. She'd always thought she'd try for the movies. A charm about her small person had brought her all the cute parts in high-school plays. But that was before Ted Jones had come to town.

"I don't care." Ted was firm. "It's got to stop. Either you marry me, or else."

"How about tonight, then?" She gave him an alluring sidelong glance.

"You mean it?"

"Of course, if you really don't want to . . . *look out!*"

Expertly Ted righted the swerve, sent the car leaping ahead toward Kansas City. "We'll have to hurry it up. I wouldn't dare not to be in the office on time tomorrow morning."

"I like to be in a hurry." Tiny's voice dropped to a low note, as it did when she was excited.

"You little devil, Tiny!"

"You know you didn't bring the license tonight, Ted."

"Right here." Ted patted his pocket, grinned.

"Ted Jones, I don't believe I'll marry you after all. What right had you to think I'd marry you tonight? When we got that license, I said I'd have to see."

"I thought I'd take a bet on it. Well, how about it?"

Tiny snuggled close.

Down the straight, level road they went, the car lights picking out a hedge of osage orange, a tree, silos standing above fields.

After the marriage and a beautiful wedding supper, Ted found his money exhausted.

"We'll just have to spend the night in the car then," said Tiny firmly. "I won't go back to Colfax without a honeymoon."

In the early morning light, Ted pulled out his watch, looked at it. "My God, Tiny! I'll be due at the Plant before we can possibly make it!" He hurried the car into the main road. "Sit up, Tiny. I've got to have both hands."

Tiny sat up. Suddenly she was scared, too. From now on, Ted's job meant something to her. Not alone her pleasure, her bread and butter depended on it. She felt sobered. It hadn't mattered much whether she kept the occasional job she had, because she could always fall back on her father. Bookkeeper at the bank, he drew no large salary, but her mother was a good manager and Tiny was their only child. They lived in a small brown house on a side street and were careful, except when it came to clothes for Tiny. Tiny loved clothes.

Brakes grinding, Jones drew up at the Plant. "Go on over to my room, Tiny. Here's the key."

"Maybe I better go home." She guessed she'd get that explanation over right away.

Ted hurried into the Plant, ran along the catwalks, up the steel treads of stairs to the laboratory. "I'm late. It won't happen again, Paul, I promise you."

Seaton spoke in a quiet voice. "What you so scared about?"

"The boss has got the hooks into me. You know that as well as I do."

Seaton studied him. Did Ted think he'd told on him? He had nothing to gain by telling about the spoiled yeast, and hadn't. Whatever Chase knew, he had guessed.

"I'm married." Ted was struggling into his white coat. "That's what took the time."

"I'll be darned. Tiny?"

"Yep." A grin spread over Ted's face. "Got to tend to my job from now on. Tiny'll see I do. But suppose we have bad luck with the yeast again? No fault of ours . . . just bad luck?"

"I wouldn't worry, if I were you. Chase isn't as tough as he makes out to be. He's got to keep us up to scratch, that's all. He'll give you a fair break."

"Don't be a dope, Paul! You know how much of a break a guy gets when the boss wants to save his own skin. We've got to look out for ourselves. I'd be for going in with Fred Stretz. Fred thinks that now's the time to all join together and ask for more pay. We'll put it over if we do it together. Chase won't want the whole force to quit on him right at the beginning."

"I think it'd be a low-down trick to tackle Chase now." Paul spoke with disgust. "He's on a salary, too."

"And a damn good one, I'll bet. Tiny's one expensive kid, Paul. Now's the time, before Chase has made good, if we do it at all. Fred's having a little get-together tonight at five."

Ted debated the matter with himself. Perhaps it wasn't giving Chase a break, but then, was Chase giving him one? Why should he work harder than he needed to, and why shouldn't he get all he could out of the job?

10

EVA STRETZ, plump, anxious-looking, didn't stop to take off her bungalow apron before starting for the Plant to get Fred. She seldom did.

He's awful late, she fretted, sitting outside the Plant in the car. If she'd known, she'd have brought the little ones. It was Blanche's night to come to supper, too, and that meant extra.

Blanche Wilson and Eva Stretz were half-sisters. When

Blanche got tired of her meager housekeeping over a gas ring, she went to Eva's for supper.

There, at last, was Fred. "What kept you?" Eva asked.

"Business," he said, slinking down beside her, his knees drawn up to make room for his long legs in the short-gearred car.

Eva threw in her clutch suddenly, sending the car leaping forward.

"My God!" said Stretz. "What do you think you're doing?"

"I've got to hurry, Fred. I don't know what's happening to the children, and I got Blanche coming, too."

In and out of traffic, with magnificent recklessness, Mrs. Stretz drove the car. But as the grey bungalow came into sight, her frantic haste began to leave her. She was always like this, always worried when she was away from home. When she stepped over the threshold of her house, she became immediately serene. Peace spread out from her ample person.

Fred and her six children knew that once she was within the house they could rely on her substantial presence. When they were troubled, she always managed to cook their favorite food, piled their plates a little higher with it. When they were sick she nursed them, when they were well she washed dishes, scrubbed, ironed and baked for them.

Hired help was unthinkable to Eva Stretz. Only at the births of her children did she tolerate it. Then, truly, did serenity go out of her. Precious vitamins thrown down the sink! Fred's steak cooked too much! Things too terrible to be borne. In spite of the doctor's stern objections, she always got up within a week.

"What you got for supper?" Fred asked, coming into the kitchen after putting the car away.

"Steak. And I got fresh onions, too."

Fred lifted a cover from a kettle. His favorite onion soup, rich stock, the onions brown and fragrant.

"You keep your nose out of that," Eva told him.

Fred felt better already . . . not quite so furious at the men at the Plant for not backing him up. His meeting had been a flop. Except for Ted Jones and Pat and three of the grain handlers, no one had come to it. Blanche had been there, of course, but she didn't count. Bebbidge and his men had gone home right after work, and so had Seaton.

"Better call the children. I see Blanche coming down the street."

"Yo ho!" Fred called, going to the door, putting his hands to his mouth.

The children began gathering from the yard, the porch, the twins coming down from upstairs. Noisy and impatient, they found their places at the table.

"You oughtn't be so noisy," said their aunt, sitting down with nice precision. "You ought to be more like little ladies and gentlemen."

"Aw, let the kids alone, Blanche," said Fred.

"Fred's got an idea," said Blanche, as they began to eat. "That's what kept us so late. Wants to band the men together and ask for more pay. I tell him it's foolish right now. We ought to wait till the business's making more profit."

"God damn Chase!" Fred morosely picked at his dinner. "I don't like the fella. We got our rights."

"Hush, Fred! Before the children!" Eva glanced anxiously around the table at the six pairs of black eyes fastened on Fred. "Besides, you've got no grounds of complaint against Mr. Chase, has he, Blanche?"

"Well, I don't know," said Blanche. "Maybe Fred's got something on his side."

"See?" said Fred sourly. "Blanche knows how it is with a workin' man."

"Well, I never!" said Eva. "You flop around like a weather vane, Blanche Wilson!"

Blanche's a fool, Eva said to herself, as she dished out the

dessert in the kitchen. I'd like to give her a good shaking. Looking so pleased over Fred's turning to her! He's just strutting. He knows his pay's good. It's spoiled him, having so much money. Blanche looked downright handsome, flushed up like that, though. What she needs is a man of her own.

"Now, Fred," Eva said, "you eat your pudding and stop fussing."

Fred did.

"And you, Blanche, you've got the best pay of any woman in town. Jimmie, run and turn your pa's program on."

"Let one of the girls do it, Ma." Jim, built like his father, weary with his adolescent growth, felt that asking him to walk across the room was too much.

His sisters, Mabel and Margaret, sitting opposite him, raised their eyebrows, scowled at him.

"Let me do it, I like to," begged a thin, vivacious little girl, sitting next to Blanche.

"All right, Leila, you do it. I forgot, you like to." And Eva smiled at Leila.

The radio was a good one . . . the best. Stretz prided himself on knowing fine machinery and liking classical music. He was a musician himself. Didn't he play the piccolo in the town band?

Moving awkwardly, his high, thin shoulders and his big abdomen thrown out of plumb—out of plumb as he never would have allowed machinery to be—Fred got into his easy chair close to the radio. The symphony began. A burst of French horns, the fine, sweet strains of the violins.

Leila squatted on the floor in front of the radio.

"There. Now he's happy and Leila's fixed." Eva gave a little sigh of contentment. "You two big ones can have the table for your homework," she added. "Mabel and Margaret, when you get the dishes done, you put the little ones to bed. I want to talk to your Aunt Blanche."

"Look here," said Eva, as she joined Blanche out on the

porch. "I don't like your stirring Fred up. You keep your hands off. He was contented with what he got until the new boss came. He's making more money now than he ever made before." Then she caught herself. That last big raise Hobson had given him, Fred had told her not to say anything to Blanche about it, nor anyone else. Of course, Blanche must know, keeping the Plant's books, so why didn't Fred want her to say anything? "We got this house most paid for, and we got nice things in it," she said aloud.

"Yes," said Blanche, "but you don't seem to understand that it's Fred has got to pay for them." Blanche said it with a little superiority, hoping to emphasize that she was a business woman, more of a woman of the world than Eva was.

"Oh, pshaw, Blanche!"

"Well, I guess maybe Fred misses Si Burton," Blanche conceded. "He kind of hoped Si would be the new manager, I guess. They seemed to have a lot in common. This man's an outsider to him."

There's something Fred's not telling me, thought Eva. He's got things all crooked inside himself again. He used to be contented, and that was before he got that big raise a while back. Funny he wants another one right now.

11

As STEPHEN came through the door of his office into the engine room the next morning, he heard voices. Stretz's voice.

"You're more of a God-damn fool than I thought you was. You and Seaton are a drag on us. If you'd come in, we could have put it through last night. Now, we're going to give you one more chance."

"Who're you to talk to us about one more chance?" Stephen realized that he had never before heard anger in the comfortable voice of Bebbidge. "You'll only make trouble for yourself, and you're stirring up the men. They'll just

be disappointed. You won't get away with anything with Chase."

Stephen moved quietly out of earshot. So that's what's up. Going to try me on, he thought grimly.

That afternoon he called into his office the heads of the several departments.

"I want to talk a few things over with you," he began. "You know, probably, that the present owner got this Plant under foreclosure. It wasn't paying, and it isn't now." He paused to note the effect of his words. The men's faces were noncommittal. "I've found there are a good many loopholes. You boys have got to watch your requisitions. Most of the miscellaneous supplies can be cut. Just for example, why are we buying all these portable lights?"

Stephen kept silent for a moment, then, making his voice brittle and hard, he finished, "It's up to you to plug the holes. If that doesn't do the trick, it means a pay cut all around. You can pass this on to your men."

Blanche Wilson was sitting at her desk across the room, pretending to be busy with her books, but she managed to watch what was going on. She wished that Jones boy could hear Mr. Chase talk like this. Fred Stretz was mad, she could see that. He won't dare talk higher wages now, she said to herself. Do 'em all good to get good and scared. Make 'em careful. Of course Ronald is careful. Too bad he's had to take it along with the others. She found a chance to smile at Bebbidge as he went out.

Once the great door into the Plant had swung to behind the men, Bebbidge looked out of the corner of his eye at Stretz. He could see that Fred was fighting mad.

"Fine kind of a fella you are, Beb," snarled Stretz. "You and Seaton here! We'd a had him where we wanted him if we'd acted quick. Now he's took over the lead, we can't do nothin'."

Seaton, indifferent to Stretz's tirade, left the others, a little wearily went on up to his laboratory. Pat, mad clear through,

took his time getting back to the cooker deck. So I got to tell my men, have I?

"Hey, you," he said to the cooker runners, "after this, when you bust light bulbs, you got to mend 'em."

The men greeted this sally with wide grins. They were used to Pat.

"This ain't kiddin'," said Pat. "The new boss says every mother's son of us'll take a pay cut if we don't tighten up."

"Look here, Beb." Stretz's voice took on a bullying note as soon as he was alone with Bebbidge. "You've let me down. I ain't takin' it from you, get that? You was one of Si's men, and it don't do to go soft. You'll find even if he ain't here, you better watch your step. I told you to turn up at that meetin'."

Bebbidge looked him square in the eyes. "Your game's up, Fred. You ain't the boss no more. The only kindness I ever done you and Si Burton was to keep my mouth shut, and I ain't bound by that." He turned his back on Fred, went over to the machines, took up an oil can. Adroitly he filled the oil cups on the Corliss, not wasting a drop. You could bring up expenses even by dribbling oil away.

12

SEATON's exacting work in the laboratory, the strain of constantly checking up on Ted, frayed his nerves. It was because of the failure in his department, he told himself, that Chase had had to crack down on the men. Another accident to the yeast and the wage cut would probably go through. He must in some way avoid that.

He and Muriel had married the year his father had done so well on the farm, when corn had brought a dollar and a half a bushel. His father had figured he could buy the adjoining forty and pay for it easily. Then prices had dropped. It took twice the corn he had expected it would to meet his

payments. In the end they had had to mortgage their original farm. Paul's mother, frantic with fear that they would lose the old home, begged him to help with the interest. The letter had come just at the time when, by careful planning, he and Muriel had got ahead enough to feel it was safe for them to have a baby.

He had placed before Muriel his mother's letter.

After a pause, she had said, "If we give up having Paul Second, we can do it."

That was all. But it had happened three times now.

Muriel had been a little more silent each time. He wished it weren't so hard for him to say the things he felt. If he were more like Ted, they could talk things out. But Muriel wasn't the talking kind, either. He was afraid she was grieving about not having a child.

And now, the possibility of a pay cut. For one moment, Paul was angry. His salary seemed a miserable pittance, anyway. He felt cheated. Through those years of grinding economy when he was trying to get his degree, he had been buoyed up by the thought that he would be entering a field in which he could live without scrimping all the time.

He was good. He knew it. Many of his suggestions had been used at the Plant. But he himself hadn't got a cent out of them.

Then his better judgment told him he couldn't afford to be angry. He needed his energies for his work. He couldn't have a pay cut interfering with Muriel's happiness. He drove himself to the minutest inspection of the laboratory. Such a catastrophe as bad yeast they simply could not have again. And yet there was no absolute surety that it could be avoided.

STEPHEN had used the instrument of fear, which worked in business when men needed their jobs badly enough. There

had seemed no other tool at hand for the emergency. The men, he noticed, went about their work a little sullenly, but with energy, and Miss Wilson reported smaller requisitions for supplies. But it wasn't real co-operation, not the kind he wanted, he thought, coming upon a portable light taped into its socket.

"Look here," he said to Pat, for the light was on the cooker deck. "This won't do. It's dangerous in a plant like this. Suppose you had a short circuit? You couldn't pull your light. That's no way to save on supplies. You're risking the whole Plant."

"I don't know who done that," Pat replied. "Some guy scared for his job, I guess."

But Stephen knew, as Pat did, that Pat had taken the easy way to follow Stephen's instructions . . . not caring that he took a chance.

Of all the men, fear worked most completely on the one he least wished to intimidate—Seaton. He's slaving himself out, was Stephen's silent verdict, as he watched Seaton's tense drive. He's putting in far too many hours in the laboratory. This kind of stimulus burned a man up. He didn't want to use up a man like Seaton, then throw him on the scrap heap.

14

THESE days when Stephen had been trying to organize his business, Hester had been trying to organize her house. Many times before, following Stephen when his business had taken him first over China, now over America, Hester had shaped a house into a home. Each such homemaking had had its own difficulties which absorbed every moment of her time. But in China, she had always had any number of servants to help her. In spite of the easier conditions in America—plumbing, running water—the task seemed immeasurably harder, with only an occasional day's help from Jessica.

Sometimes Hester wished a little ruefully that she hadn't been quite so hasty in proposing to Stephen that she do her own work, as a part of their plan to live within his salary. But she had a stake in seeing it through. It was a proof to Stephen that she'd stand by him this time.

Today she had her first leisure. She went into the living room, took her violin out of its case. She would begin this afternoon to work, to take up her music alone. If with joy, good. If not . . . well, she must work anyway. Why it was necessary for the happiness of those around her she did not know. All she knew was that without it she fell to pieces spiritually and threatened their security.

She began to play. The effort was not so difficult as she had expected. The new discipline of mind and wrist was actual.

Stephen came up the walk on his return from the office. His mind, occupied as it was with uneasiness over the human relations he felt he was violating in the pressure on his men, had seemed to have no room for his own personal relations, these days. Now, suddenly, hearing Hester playing, his mind focused upon her. Her playing, which must always be something outside his experience, but which she had presented to him in terms of work and discipline, the night he had told her of the merger business, he now comprehended in such terms.

She's working, and I am, he thought with contentment. He did not analyze further why this should give him a deeper sense of companionship with her.

15

IN STEPHEN'S morning mail at the Plant was a letter from a firm in Kansas City, inquiring about the possibility of buying alcohol for their business. They asked many questions about its quality, when and at what regular intervals they could have delivery, what price the Plant could quote them.

This letter was the first answer to some direct sales efforts Stephen had been making. He was gratified.

In his mind he went quickly over the questions, and with Miss Wilson's help, worked out a price he could afford to offer the firm, if they took a quantity and at intervals that gave Stephen a chance to handle his output to best advantage.

"I believe," he said to Miss Wilson, "I ought to go over and talk to them while they're interested. See if I can't clinch this order. Will you get them on the 'phone for me, please?"

Yes, they were willing to see him today.

He made a hasty check of the Plant. Stretz was off this morning . . . had reported sick. His assistant was carrying on. Stephen didn't know how competent the assistant was. He hoped there'd be no emergency while he was away, but he couldn't let an opportunity like this go.

It was nearly noon when he entered the office of the president of the firm. "It's pretty late," he said. "I wonder if you'd have lunch with me. It would give us a good chance to talk."

Together they walked the few blocks to the city's most popular hotel. In the comfortable setting of its coffee shop, Stephen had the satisfaction of making his first profitable deal for his friend, Jo Tuttle. As he and his business acquaintance, the deal completed, sat drinking their coffee, Stephen looked over the roomful of people. Kansas City interested him.

His guest pulled out his watch. "I expect I'd better be getting back . . . business appointment. Now, don't hurry your coffee." He put a detaining hand on Stephen's shoulder. "I'll just go along, and you take your time."

Stephen, waiting a few moments longer to pay the check, had his attention caught by a man sitting with his back toward him. That black hair thinning on the crown, bushy in the nape of the neck, growing raggedly down under the collar. Stooped shoulders. Often he had had just that view of Stretz sitting before his control board. But it couldn't be Stretz. Stretz had been reported sick, today. He watched for

the man to turn a little. Yes, it *was* Stretz, and the man sitting opposite him was Burton.

That's curious business, Stephen thought. It's not exactly natural that those two should have much in common, now that Burton's away from Colfax. Maybe he's trying to get Stretz into his own business. He seemed to think a good deal of him. Hate to lose Stretz, just now, though he's a trouble-maker, I'm afraid. But he certainly knows his job.

Stephen saw Stretz hitch his shoulders.

He's sore about something, he thought. Well, that doesn't indicate Burton will get him away from us.

Whatever they're doing together, Stretz has got no business being here, that's certain. That's the kind of underhandedness I can't let the men get away with. We need a closer check up. What we need, he said to himself, is a general superintendent, a man I can trust. Even when I'm there I can't give close enough supervision and tend to the office work. If I'm to take many trips like this, getting new business, it's very essential.

As he rode home, he kept niggling away at the reason for that meeting between Stretz and Burton. I don't believe I'll let Stretz know I saw him today. I'll take his excuse of sickness at face value. And wait.

Si Burton hadn't wanted to take a man like Stretz to his club, the safest place for confidential talk. Instead, he had chosen this table in the corner of the big hotel dining room, where they could talk and not be overheard if they were careful. He had hoped that during luncheon he might ease Fred off, but Fred was proving difficult.

"I don't want bad blood between us," said Burton, leaning forward so as not to be overheard, "but I've paid you all I'm going to."

"Not what you agreed to." Stretz stuck to his demands with a doggedness that Burton hadn't expected. "That house you and me rented, my name's on the lease. It's got three

months to run. And I've got myself tied up on some personal things on what you said you'd do for me."

"How was I to know, then, that there'd be a foreclosure so soon or that the new boss would be too lily-white to go in on it? I tried my best to fix things up."

"That don't make no difference," Stretz said obstinately. "You promised me so much money for the job."

Burton leaned nearer. "Now, look, Fred. I've left you the business, haven't I?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean," said Burton, "it's all in your hands now, isn't it?" I've handed over the equipment and the opportunity to you. You can make a cozy little sum, you know."

Stretz stared at him. "You know it's too dangerous when there's a manager around the Plant. You can come through, Si, or I'll spill the whole works to Chase."

"Oh, no, you won't. And you might lower your voice when you have anything to say." Burton spoke with quiet assurance. "If you look into the matter," he went on, "you'll find the only one implicated is yourself. The goods are on you, Fred, not on me. There's enough evidence to put you in jail for a Federal offense."

"You God-damn skunk!" Stretz fully realized, for the first time, that Burton had left him holding the bag.

"Well, I guess there isn't anything more we've got to say to each other," said Burton, rising. At the door of the dining room, he added, "Wish you luck, Fred." He left Stretz, making his way through the lobby of the hotel, losing himself quickly in the crowd.

Fred went out to the car, pointed it directly toward Colfax. I got to get home, he kept thinking, driving the car at top speed, then slowing down for a few miles, remembering that he mustn't get home before his usual time. I can't let Eva know where I been. She'd worm out of me I wasn't at the Plant. Hope Blanche don't blat about my not being there. But he wanted to get home to Eva.

He was terribly frightened. Frightened at what might happen if he went on with this bootlegging business, getting alcohol out of the Plant, selling it. Federal offense if he got caught, and why wouldn't he get caught? Frightened of what would happen if he didn't go on. He was in pretty deep with that house on his hands. He'd have to pay the rent, or the owner would begin to look into things. If anybody entered that house before he got a chance to clear things out, he'd be caught just the same as if he was bootlegging right now. His wages weren't enough to meet the rent. The money Si slipped him from time to time he wouldn't have now. He'd told Eva it was a raise. How'd he explain losing it?

It was when he got home and came into the kitchen that his panic subsided. Eva had lowered the shades over the open window to shut out the sun. One of them flapped in the breeze. She had just come in from planting vegetable seeds in the back yard plot. She was moist and warm. He felt good when he got near her.

No use getting panicky, he told himself, as he unlaced his good shoes. He *could* go on with the business. Draining off a little alcohol at a time, he could make enough to carry him over. Don't need to be a pig about it. Si always took the big share of the profit. I can go careful and get myself clear. That grain checker's a right guy. He'll keep on fiddling the account for me, and keep his mouth shut. If we dribble out just a little from the storage tanks at night, regular but small, the gauges won't show but a mite different.

So, in the presence of Eva's mothering security, Fred thought himself through his trouble, persuaded himself that he'd wanted to run straight, but folks had it in for him. It wasn't as if he hadn't tried to do different. He'd tried to get wages raised. And he'd tried to get Si Burton to do what he promised. The swine, leaving him stuck for three months with that lease!

I'll have to get somebody at the Plant to help me out. Somebody with guts, who ain't scared over little things. Somebody

money means more to than playin' safe. Can't manage getting the alky out alone.

"What you wearing your good clothes to work for, Fred?" asked Eva, eying him.

"Humph?" said Fred. "Wear 'em if I want to. Why'd I take the car this morning? Told you I had to see a man, didn't I? That's why I'm late."

16

TINY and Ted Jones had had a stormy time house-hunting. Tiny wouldn't have the small house, near the Seatons', that was vacant and which Ted urged they take.

"I want a better house," she insisted. "We could manage it easy, Ted, buying the furniture on the instalment plan, with your salary."

"This house is big enough for us until we get a family. You needn't pout, Tiny. Sure, we're going to have a family." Ted stood his ground.

Tiny wasn't pleased about the family. "I don't want to live on a side street all my life like my mother, Ted. If you start living in a little house and we have kids right away, we will. Look, Ted. If you're bound to have a family, there's no use in our moving so soon. Moving's expensive. We could take that house Swift wants us to right now."

"Okay. If you give in on the family, I'll give in on the house." After all, the only way to get on, he guessed, was to start out on the standard they intended to keep, as Tiny said.

On Saturday, the stores of Colfax were open late into the evening, offering the public every inducement to buy. The furniture store, just beyond the bank building, was catering especially to newly married couples. Their best salesmen had organized a spring drive for the "marrying season." The front of the store was arranged in a series of rooms such as brides and grooms would dream of.

This first Saturday of the drive, the head salesman, flower in his buttonhole, saw Tiny and Ted as they came in the door.

"A house to furnish? Right in our line. Over here, perhaps, in this set of rooms, you'll find about what you need. Just a moment, I'll take you around myself." He motioned to a clerk, saying to him in an undertone, "Not many here yet. You take my place at the door, give the glad hand when people come in. I'll tend to these two. That gal looks like a high stepper. I'll make her spend."

"Now it will pay you," he said to Tiny, "to buy the best. It's the cheapest in the long run."

Tiny and Ted grew excited, then a little bewildered. They sat in easy chairs and on sofas to try their softness and comfort. Tiny felt very flattered by the way the salesman took for granted that she had expert knowledge of this and that make of mattress, vacuum cleaner, and gas stove. She adopted a serious, domestically competent air. When the salesman began discussing period furniture with her, Tiny outdid herself. Picking up his jargon, she talked glibly of the good points of Queen Anne, Chippendale, and Colonial design.

Ted was deeply impressed. Tiny was a smart kid. Any man ought to be proud of a wife like that, talking about swell furniture as if she'd lived with it all her life. He could see the salesman was impressed, too.

An hour later, Tiny triumphant, Ted strutting, they stood side by side by the Queen Anne sofa which they had finally decided upon, waiting for the salesman to come back with papers for Ted to sign.

"Gee, Tiny, where'd you learn so much about furniture?" Ted looked at her almost with reverence.

"Why shouldn't I know nice things?" said Tiny complacently. She wasn't going to let on to him that she had got most of her knowledge from the movies. "It was smart of you, too, to make them deliver the things tonight."

"Well, they say they will in their ad," said Ted.

"Ted, we can sleep in the new house! We'll have such fun settling!"

"Now as to references," said the salesman, "you'll probably like to give one of your business associates."

"How about Mr. Chase?" Tiny whispered.

"Golly, no! He'd know all about me, then. That'd give him the whip hand. I'll put down Paul Seaton. Paul's the kind that has money put away, but doesn't let anyone know it. That kind of a fella always has a good record in a town."

As they walked out of the shop, never in all their lives had they had such an exalted feeling.

"It was like being in heaven, Ted, buying like that," Tiny gasped.

They sat on the doorstep of their house waiting. It grew later and later.

"Ted," said Tiny doubtfully, "what'll we sleep on, if they don't come?"

"They'll come, all right," said Ted sturdily.

At last, about twelve, a van drew up at the curb.

"Hey, you," called the driver. "Jones live here? Awful crazy to get your stuff, asking for a night delivery."

They slept late. Ted, waking first, lay on his back, contemplating the top drawer of the mahogany veneer highboy which came in his line of vision. A lot of stuff around, it seemed to him. Possessing it, he found it had already lost a little of its charm. I feel as if I were sobering up after a drunk, he thought.

By Monday, Ted realized they had gone in pretty deep. Along toward noon he strolled out to Stretz at the control board. "You really think, Fred, there isn't any chance of a raise? I'd be willing to tackle Paul again and see if I could swing him over."

"Nothing doing. Can't help a lot of chicken-livered guys," said Fred. "What's the matter? Why you all to once stirred up about it? Need dough?"

"Sure, I need dough."

"There's a way to get some."

"I thought you said raises were off."

"Well, in a way, it's more wages. It's what's coming to us and we ought to get it."

"What's up?"

"Can you keep your trap shut?"

"Nothing I do better." Ted grinned.

"I've got a scheme we might talk over when we get a chance. Hunt me up, tonight after work."

17

HESTER was finding housekeeping difficult. For years, in China, even the smallest personal things had been done for her. Even in New York, except for a few weeks when she had taken care of the apartment, she had never been without help. Now she had a house and a small active boy to care for. And she had to own that she didn't know how to cook. Then there was marketing to be done. Anna had done that for her in New York.

I've the best will in the world, she said to herself as she threw away a rather heavy mess of mashed potatoes. They didn't seem to come to anything. I shouldn't want my neighbors to know how hard I find it.

She was starting out for market early this afternoon, for she wanted to be at home for the Tuttle Farm Program which came at five.

Tim objected, as he did each day. He did not wish to leave his garden. He did not want to ride in a go-cart. Every waking hour he wished to devote to walking, to jumping. The enjoyment of his legs was very great, just now. Still . . . yes, he'd go.

I must learn to drive our car, she said to herself as she pushed Tim's cart along as rapidly as possible. But how would

she manage all the rest of the things she had to do during the time she was learning?

She was passing the first big house in the block, one of the landmarks of her daily trip to town. Mr. Swift had pointed it out to her that first day, as the house of Colfax's most prominent citizen, the banker, Mr. Evans. Mid-Victorian, like the other good houses, it had verandas and a cupola. The large plate-glass windows looked spotless, even though there had been a shower the night before. White lace curtains thickly draping them looked freshly laundered. The well-kept lawn had no movement across it except the wavering shadows cast by the trees nearly in full leaf now.

Hester wheeled Tim into the independent grocery store. She hadn't been here before, but she thought she would try it today. Perhaps they delivered.

There were a number of women ahead of her. As she stood a little to one side waiting her turn, she watched them go about their marketing. Had she known these women, each one would have stood for some special quality—for kindness or lack of kindness, for bravery in some hard experience, for simplicity or superiority in accepting good fortune. But not knowing them, Hester saw them objectively and unsympathetically. Several of them handled the vegetables and fruits with a kind of greedy delight, tumbling them about until their hands felt out the best in the pile. All of them were intent, eager, trying to get the best. She envied them their efficiency.

At last it was her turn. "Besides myself, I've only my husband and little boy, and he hasn't reached the age where he eats a great deal," she told the man who came to wait on her.

"Nice kid," he said. "Here, buddy, have a red apple."

Tim accepted it soberly.

"Strangers around here, ain't you?" the man asked, looking at Hester with a genial smile.

Hester found herself going into details over how short a time they'd lived here and the intricacies of getting settled.

He was a sympathetic and patient listener to all she had to say. This was class trade. He didn't intend to let the chain store get it away from him. "Perhaps," he said, as he packed her order, "you'd like to start an account. We deliver, too, if it isn't convenient for you to come in. We got some boys take things around after school, if you tell us where you live."

"Oh, I'm so glad you do. We live where the Bronsons used to."

"The old Bronson place? Husband taken over the Alcohol Plant, I hear. You just give us a call whenever you can't get in. Ask for Slim. That's what everybody calls me."

Her packages piled around Tim's feet, Hester started home. It came to her after a little how unreserved she had been, telling details about herself, lengthening out the trivialities of buying as she had sometimes in the city heard women lengthening out the trivialities of the beauty parlor.

A phase I'm going through, I suppose, she said to herself, because I'm new and a little adrift. I even forgot I was in a hurry.

Hastily she dumped her bundles in the kitchen, flew for the radio, turned the button to the station over which Tuttle's program would come. She had caught it at the very beginning. The announcer was saying, "This program comes to you through the courtesy of the Tuttle Farm Implement Company, the makers of fine combines, tractors, plows. Farmers needing new equipment can arrange for easy payments through our agents." A pause, then the room was flooded with the mellow sound of music. The restraint, the fine precision that Vera gave to her orchestra.

She curled herself in Stephen's big chair, tried to listen critically as she had done so often at Vera's rehearsals. The program this afternoon demanded all her attention—intricate, difficult passages.

It was time to start dinner or it wouldn't be ready when Stephen got home, tired from his work at the Plant. She

could get the beans ready while she listened. Walking lightly so as not to miss anything, she went into the kitchen, opened the cupboard where she kept her saucepans. The one she needed was at the bottom. Carefully she lifted the pans on top of it. A cover leaning against the cupboard wall fell with a clatter of tin upon tin. "Oh!" said Hester, wincing. Back in her chair, the paper bag tucked down beside her, she began snapping the beans.

As the program finished and the announcer came on again urging the audience to buy, Hester's mind went back to the women she had seen that afternoon. These women, herself, the women on the farms who were supposed to be Vera's audience, how could music release them, caught as they all were in the coil of the material—a coil designed to be loosened by Vera's music, then tightened again by the announcer?

That evening she wrote Vera.

"I'm going to tell you just how it is," she began. "I promised you I'd go on listening to your programs on the radio, give you my criticism, just as I did when I sat in the studio. But here's what I was like—I was too tired to listen. I'd been on my feet every minute since Stephen left this morning. The program you gave demanded the closest attention, even for a trained musician. I'll be honest. Part of the time I didn't know what you were playing. If that was true of me, how do you think the women on farms listened, if they listened at all? They're a good deal busier than I am.

"Anyway, of one thing I'm sure. Your program comes at the wrong hour for farm women. They're either getting dinner or eating it. I had to get the beans ready for dinner while I listened. Oh, Vera, the snap of beans didn't go well!"

JO TUTTLE SENIOR went often to Vera's studio to talk over the Tuttle Farm Hour. He had come to feel a tremendous

pride in his personal sponsoring of a program of fine music.

In the last year, the last months even, Jo had grown enormously rich. The moderate-sized fortune inherited from his father he had made into a sizable one during the boom years of the War, when the Middle West had been turned into one great wheat field, and tractors and plows had been needed to break up thousands of new acres, used until then for pasture. But that fortune was nothing to what he had made in the stock market. Now he was one of the truly rich men of the country, accepted in the inner circle of rich men. This program of his had turned out to be one of his cleverest strokes, placing him among that successful group of business men who were donors of culture to the country. Fine music, coming at an hour when all New York could listen in, had brought him a splendid response from city people and musicians.

He came into Vera's studio, his pockets stuffed with fan mail. He liked to come here, liked the atmosphere that Vera gave to the room. Its austerity, its restraint—not a single thing that was not needed—rested Jo Tuttle, coming as he did from the luxurious abundance of his own home. He settled his heavy body, however, not too easily in one of Vera's straight chairs. "You don't make it so comfortable anyone will linger here, do you?"

"They're good chairs for work. This, you know, isn't a studio designed for entertainment," she reminded him.

But for all Vera said, the studio was not quite the secluded place of work it once had been. The attention the program was getting was not centered on Tuttle. Vera Lichens was being talked about in many circles. The patrons of music and sponsors who were looking for popularity with the growing radio public, were talking of her as one of the coming conductors. A heterogeneous lot of successful people were hunting Vera out. It brought her a restless, outside-herself feeling. She was finding the approval of these who could make her professionally, more and more necessary.

As Tuttle pulled his letters from his pockets, Vera felt impatient to take the lot out of his hands, hunt out for herself what was said, and by whom. She had plenty of fan mail of her own, but it didn't entirely satisfy her. She wanted to know what people said to Tuttle.

Tuttle sorted over the letters. "Now, here," he said, after what to Vera seemed a long time, "listen to this." He read her a bit here and there, put the letter aside, picked up another.

Tantalizing to Vera, this reading of bits. She wanted to read the letters as a whole, judge for herself of their value.

Finally he slipped them all back into his pocket. "I guess that sums up last week's work. It's very satisfactory, as far as it goes," he added. "But in all this pile there isn't a single letter from a farmer's wife. Of course, I don't suppose they have much time for writing." In spite of the prestige the program was bringing to him, Tuttle couldn't quite make up his mind that Vera was giving him his money's worth until he got response from the trade. Money spent should bring its monetary return. He wanted Vera to realize this. "The point is, do you think the program's reaching the farmers? Are they writing to you?" He spoke now in the businesslike tones he used in his office.

"I had one fan letter," said Vera a little dryly, "that might be classed in that group. Hester Chase has written me about last week's program." She read him bits, as he had her.

"That's pretty good about the beans," he said when she had finished. "I guess she's right about the hour. It seemed good here in New York. If I got the program at nine in the evening, that would be eight, out there. The women would be through the work for the day. Best time there is, here in New York, too."

Vera wanted the program to continue in much the same vein as it was now presented, for the sake of her professional audience. But in her heart she wasn't sure how vital such music as she was choosing was to the layman.

The next day, when Mary Trencher came in, Vera showed her Hester's letter.

At first Mary said nothing.

"Well?" said Vera at last.

"It's a good criticism," said Mary. "Hester sees it. You're going at the thing all wrong."

"Wrong? The program was your idea in the first place, my dear."

"No. Not as it is now."

"What, then?" Vera looked a little nettled.

"What music says to people, I don't know." Mary spoke slowly, feeling out what she wanted to say. "My grandfather listens to 'Oh, Susannah' the way the Italians listen to Verdi at the opera. It's mixed up with the things he knows. He remembers singing it when he was walking along by the wagons, going west. It isn't that Americans don't love music, Vera. They don't know the road to it."

"You're not suggesting that I play 'Oh Susannah,' are you, Mary?" Vera asked a little caustically.

"Not exactly," said Mary, "but we've some native music that you could use. It's important music, too, Vera. You know that—you have told me so. Wouldn't it break down that feeling of effort in listening to the kind of thing you are playing?" Mary stopped. She shouldn't be dictating to Vera. What did she know about it? She had a sudden sense of uncertainty and a feeling of being outside the issues involved in the program. Young Jo, she knew, felt the same. He had nothing to do with the broadcast any more. His father was handling the details of it now.

19

YOUNG JO was sprawled over Mary's easy chair. He seemed all arms and legs, like a boudoir doll and just as limp.

"The tired business man," Jo said. He wasn't going to let

Mary know how deep was his disappointment that his accomplishment in establishing the orchestra had got him nowhere at all with his father. It had seemed at first that the old man had recognized he had some ability. But now he had lost that stature. He was just where he had been before in the office, pushed around between Tom and his father. It belittled him in his own eyes to be belittled in his father's.

"Come over here by me, Jo," said Mary, sitting down on the couch. "You're wasted over there."

"Oh, I am, am I?" He came over, sat down beside her.

If only, thought Mary, he wasn't always so kept away from accomplishment, and so often lonely because of it. Lonely even when he was with her, in these last weeks, a spectator of her life of effort as he was of his father's. Old Jo had no right to take the broadcast away from him. It had been young Jo's idea, and he should have had the chance to work it out.

20

STEPHEN wished he could find a place in the community of Colfax. He had been here a month, and so far, the men at the Plant and the banker were his only acquaintances. Banker Evans had been very pleasant, glad to handle his account, discussed the conditions of the state with him, but his friendliness had stopped there. Stephen wanted to talk frankly to someone, needed to know what he was up against with the Plant. Si Burton had spoken of rumor and gossip. Had he been trying to head him off from some information he might gain from a friendly person? How did the Plant really stand in the town? Not too well, he had the feeling.

On Saturday noon, just as Stephen was about to leave, a man came into the office. He was English in his appearance, though he had been at great pains to disguise it, to dress as the town dressed—blue sack suit, white pin stripe, shirt, as the day was warm, open at the throat.

"My name's Hodges—neighbor of yours," the man said. "I've been meaning to drop in."

"Delighted you did," said Stephen, rising to shake hands. "I've wondered how to get acquainted with my neighbors."

Hodges looked sympathetic. "Well, it does take a bit of doing," he said. "I remember how it was when I was a new-comer to the town. People don't mean to be inhospitable. Like me, they're busy. I planned to come in before, but the town's been having too many babies this spring to allow me much sociability. I'm a doctor . . . G.P.," he added. "Hear you came from New York, Mr. Chase? Behind that?"

"China," said Stephen. "And you?"

"From England."

"Behind that?"

"The War," said Hodges, "and Siberia. Been about a bit, haven't we? You'll find it good to be settled in a town like this. We're plain people, really very nice when you know us. You see, I'm a booster for Colfax."

There was recognition in Stephen of something in common that could lead to friendship between them. Hodges had about him the air of a friendly man of many experiences. A kind of humility, really, that saw an enlargement of himself in other men.

"We need all the business we can get," Hodges went on. "We need this Plant, and I don't mind telling you, we're glad to see it change hands. Hobson's been too sick to handle things. The town hopes you'll look into the drainage here. It's not very civic-minded, saddling the residential district with such a smell. I don't know whether you get it at your house. As a matter of fact, we don't. But a lot do. Sometimes, it's bad."

"No, I don't get it, and I didn't know about it," said Stephen. "I'm glad you told me." He saw that Dr. Hodges felt strongly about the nuisance. Here was the kind of man he was looking for. Already he had put him on the track of the town's opposition to the Plant.

"Really, I didn't come to make a protest." Hodges spoke apologetically. "My wife and I wondered if you and Mrs. Chase would drop in tomorrow for a glass of near beer and some talk. I'm not called out much on Sunday evening."

"I know Mrs. Chase will be delighted, and so will I," said Stephen. "But, look, Dr. Hodges, I'm deeply interested in what you say about this drainage business. I've felt the town wasn't altogether friendly to the Plant. Tell me more about this difficulty."

"Why, the sludge from your Plant here goes straight into the town sewers," said Hodges. "It may not be dangerous, but sometimes, in certain districts, the smell's enough to knock a man down."

"Of course it won't do," Stephen said. "I'll write the owner at once. I know he won't permit a thing like that to go on. We'll straighten the matter out as soon as possible."

"Good," said Hodges. He rose. "Must be getting along home. I don't get a chance, often, to have lunch with my wife. We'll expect you about eight, tomorrow evening, then."

Stephen hurried home with his news.

"So that's how it's done," said Hester, when he had told her of the Hodges' invitation.

"How what's done?"

"How you get to know people in an American town. I've been wondering."

Now each knew the other had been lonely in Colfax.

21

THE Hodges lived only a couple of blocks away. Unlike the other dwellings, the entrance to their house was not verandaed. A solid door and high windows gave the passer-by no visual access to activities within. As Hodges swung the door back at Stephen's ring, Hester saw that the interior was distinctly English in design, a long hall running across the

front, the living rooms at the back. The house seemed full of life. A dog shaking himself, children's voices from somewhere in the depths of the upstairs rooms.

A quiet, self-possessed woman, with spectacular white hair, came down the stairs to greet them, led them into a large, comfortably shabby living room. Hospitality seemed to come naturally to these people. Mrs. Hodges picked up her knitting. Hodges brought in the near beer and got up often to answer the telephone.

"That's the way it goes in a doctor's home," Mrs. Hodges explained.

Neither of them was overanxious about Stephen and Hester. They let them find chairs that suited them, let the conversation take its own drift, meandering from Kansas to Vladivostok, down the coast of China to Shanghai, over to London, back to Colfax.

Mrs. Hodges, it seemed, was a native of the town, not an Englishwoman, as Hester had thought.

Hodges stretched his long legs, set his near beer on the floor beside him. "Were you ever in Siberia, Chase?"

"Hester and I lived on its border for three years."

"You know, then, what winter means up there. A couple of other Englishmen and I, detailed to help the White Russians, got cut off from Kolchak's army. Winter was coming on."

"You were with the Flying Remnant, then!" Stephen's voice expressed astonishment. "Do you remember, Hester, when we were in Manchuria, we heard they'd all been killed by the Russians?"

"Well, I was one of them," said Hodges. "We got down to Peking finally."

"Strange," said Stephen, "we didn't hear about it. But we were awfully cut off that winter."

"I went back to England to start over in civilian life," said the doctor. After a pause, he added, "But I got my start here instead." And he glanced at his white-haired wife.

Stephen, thinking of the circuitous road which had brought Hester and himself here, wondered by what difficult or easy road Hodges had come. "Curious that there should be two of us," he said, "in one small American city."

"Is it so strange? After all, America has always been the world's place of refuge." It was Mrs. Hodges who had spoken, setting their feet again on the safe streets of Colfax. "Could you come to dinner on Friday and meet some of the townspeople?" she asked. "We'd like you to know some of our friends."

Mrs. Hodges had been making up her mind about the Chases, not accepting off-hand her husband's favorable estimate. She sided with the townspeople, who had a prejudice against having the Plant in Colfax at all. Kansas had always been a dry state, even before national prohibition, and there had been many stories about Burton and the Plant. It seemed that since Mr. Chase came things were different. But there was still the sewage. All Mrs. Hodges' housewifely instincts rose in revolt when she thought of such a nuisance.

"You're musical, aren't you?" Hodges had turned to Hester, making one of his sudden shifts of conversation.

"Yes, I am, but how did you know?" Hester asked with surprise.

"I saw you the first night you came into the hotel. You were carrying a violin case. I noticed you didn't trust it to the boy."

"Oh," said Hester, "I hope it didn't make me look conspicuous."

"Probably not, to anyone who isn't interested in music," he answered her reassuringly. "We get pretty hungry for music here."

"Do you play?" suddenly Hester thought to ask.

"He leads the town band," came quietly from Mrs. Hodges. She studied the intricate cat's-cradle of knitting needles atop the grey sock she was finishing off.

As Hodges closed the door on Hester's and Stephen's de-

parture, she said, "Well, I guess you're right this time. They are nice."

"I knew you thought so when you asked them to dinner," he said. "I hope things break right for them."

"James," said his wife, "you don't need to take on their problems, yet."

"There's the 'phone. I'll answer. Probably the woman out at the old Rogers farm." With nervous, energetic movements, he turned from the telephone. "Yes, it is. I probably won't be in before morning. Better go to bed." He was gone, slamming the door.

Hester and Stephen walked home down the streets, the boughs of the stalky catalpas making cones of shadow under the street lamps. Lights were out in most of the houses. Their garden seemed very dark as they entered it, except for a path of light which shone out of the room where Jessica was keeping watch over Timothy. The night was warm. Tree frogs gave their sharp cry in the garden. The stars shone with a white brilliance. From the earth came the pungent odor of last year's growth, not yet quite turned into living soil.

"I suppose we should go in and let Jessica go home," said Hester with a sigh. "But it's so beautiful out here with you, Stephen."

Stephen put his arm across her shoulders. "Remember the moonlight in Manchuria?"

Hester remembered. In the Manchurian sky, the moon had hung high above the tide-washed town, transforming the grey flakings of salt into hoarfrost. They'd been married a month. She remembered Stephen's slim beauty, the straight back and slender hips, and their embrace. The evening's conversation had stirred memories of struggle, sickness, flight, but also of beauty and adventure and love on their long journey together.

After a little, Stephen spoke. "We'd better go in," he said. "I must get to bed if I'm to be any good in the morning. I've got some ticklish business on."

"Of course," said Hester. With her two hands she pulled his head down, so that his eyes were close to hers that held laughter and delight. "You're a dear, Stephen. It's only people who love each other who dare risk such rapid descent to the commonplace."

"You mean?"

"Well, like just going to bed instead of staying out in the moonlight."

"Umph!" said Stephen. "It's never seemed commonplace to me."

22

THE dinner at the Hodges' was a skillful union of unstudied hospitality and designing judgment. The Hodges had chosen their guests with reference to position—those whom it would profit the Chases to meet. The doctor greeted them all at the door, saying his wife would be in in a moment. He made no pretense of the fact that Mrs. Hodges was busy over the dinner.

In spite of his large practice, their income did not allow of many extras. Some of his patients were too poor to pay. Others had instalment payments to meet on houses and cars and often made the doctor, who gave his services first and collected afterward, wait for his money. Even some of the richer patients forgot sometimes to pay promptly. Mrs. Hodges had a small income from her father's old farm which tided them over emergencies.

Without apology, Mrs. Hodges came in from the kitchen. "I can leave everything to the girls, now," she told Mrs. Evans and Hester. "My neighbor's daughter and her school friend are helping me out. They're getting their Caesar together afterward."

"I don't see how you do it." Mrs. Evans' voice expressed both wonderment and disapproval.

"I don't either," said Hester, but with deep respect for Mrs. Hodges' prowess. "I can't get dinner for three, yet, and have it all hot at once."

"It's because you're not used to it. How many servants did you have in China?" Mrs. Hodges asked.

"Oh, but I've been home long enough to learn," Hester protested. Then, realizing that Mrs. Hodges had asked the question for the purpose of building up the Chases' prestige with Mrs. Evans, Hester hastened to add demurely, "I had ten there."

"You lived in China! How wonderful! Ten servants!"

Hester did not explain that only the poverty in China had made such an establishment possible. She understood, looking at Mrs. Evans' face, that such service meant to her a romance and glamor she had never been able to create out of the substances of her own life.

"Oh, do tell me about it," Mrs. Evans begged.

But guests were arriving. Lawyer Janes was a rotund, jolly man. A mixture of wag and cynic, he threw his remarks like javelins for any who were clever enough to throw back.

Mrs. Janes was a quiet creature. Years of admiration of her husband's ever-flowing wit had robbed her of any expression of her own.

Dr. Hodges brought in a tray of cocktail glasses.

"Grape juice!" Janes said to Stephen in an aside, making a face. "Professional ethics, he claims. He's got to sign up for his alcohol—that it's strictly for medicinal purposes. It's a privilege we allow only him." He gave Stephen a curiously contemptuous look.

I'm not making much headway with him, thought Stephen. What's behind that, I wonder?

Evans seemed very friendly this evening, showed no sign of the impersonal attitude he had assumed toward Stephen at the bank.

A tall, lanky chap named Butterfield, editor of the city's newspaper, bachelor and obviously proud of it, came in, shook

hands cordially enough, then drifted over to Hester's side. "Well, Mrs. Chase, you're giving a lovely New York touch to us this evening." He looked admiringly at her dress.

Hester was relieved to be freed from Mrs. Evans' tenacious interest.

Swift and his wife were the last to arrive. Both of them looked sleek and prosperous.

Gathered around the table with its simple setting—the neighbor's daughter and her friend serving—the group, well-known to one another, radiated its own importance. They were the leading citizens, a tribunal to pass on the social position of any newcomer. From their manner, it was evident that they considered him a novel person to sit thus intimately in their midst. Why?

Polite, but not really friendly, was Stephen's conclusion. There's something holding them back, except for Hodges and Evans. The other men, Stephen knew, were a better barometer of how he stood in the town. They were the mixers. I wonder if it's that blasted sewage business. Might well be with Swift, at least, as he's in real estate. After dinner, he found an opportunity to mention to Swift that he hoped to clear the thing up soon.

"Fine," said Swift. "I always told Si Burton if he got to be manager he'd have to do something. Pretty good sort, Si."

Evidently Si had been one of the boys, and furthermore he had evidently hoped to be manager.

As they were leaving, Mrs. Evans said to Hester, "I do want you and your husband to have dinner with us soon. Would next Tuesday suit?"

TED came home to find Tiny in tears. He took her in his arms, sat down on the Queen Anne sofa. He understood the

energetic Tiny, swept by enthusiasm and anger, a Tiny he could quarrel with and love passionately. But this Tiny, lying limp against him, without laughter and energy, bewildered him, filled him with pity. How binding pity could be he had yet to learn. "Darling, darling," he murmured frantically, "tell me what's happened."

Tiny's face was against his. He could feel her lips trembling. "I—" she gasped at last. "We can't sit here. That man—"

"What man?" Ted turned cold.

"The man about the furniture. He's going to take it."

"Oh, is that all!" For a moment Ted's relief amounted almost to disgust.

"Is that all!" Something of Tiny's vigor came back. "Is that *all*! He was horrid. He said they'd sent us two notices and they weren't going to send any more. I told him that we'd put the notice away and we were going to pay when we could. We had extra expenses. Besides, it was less than a month since we'd got our things. Then he got mean, and said didn't I know the first of the month when it came around. If we didn't pay, they'd be here tomorrow, and they'd take every stick of furniture away. And—" Tiny fell to sobbing again.

"I won't stand for any man talking to my wife like that. I'll go down and see about it right now."

At the store, however, Ted found the attitude toward him had changed. Nobody seemed to wish to accommodate him now.

"I've nothing to do with it," the salesman told him. "We're only a branch concern. They send the collectors over from Kansas City."

"They've got no business frightening a woman!" Ted dug his hands deep into his pockets.

"As to that, I can't say. All I know is, we've got to have a payment by the end of the week. I haven't any right to give you even that much time."

"You'll get it," said Ted in a disgusted tone. He turned, walking quickly out of the store. Once outside, his bravado left him. It wasn't the first time he'd felt the iron grip of debt. But now he had Tiny.

Well, he could see just one out. He'd trail along with Fred Stretz. He had been holding Fred off, so far. Ted could make a tall guess what Fred had hinted at, that day. Like Seaton, Ted knew the gossip about the Plant but, unlike Seaton, he believed it. He'd been a little proud that the gang hadn't been able to touch him up to this time. But this emotion of pity for Tiny brought a curiously ennobling sensation which made him see it differently. Defending her justified it.

"Look, Fred," he said, watching his opportunity to catch Stretz alone, the next day. "I'm ready to talk business."

"You don't say!" said Fred. "How'll I know I can count on you?"

"Because I'm up against it. I've got to have money."

"Meet me tonight, then, two blocks down from the Plant. Say ten-thirty."

Fred congratulated himself that he'd got Ted. Ted was smart. Nothing yellow about him either . . . once he went in, he'd stick. Ted was new to it, too—didn't know the ropes. Might be a chance to get out from under, the way Si Burton had. They could get started again, tonight. About time, too.

24

THE day after the Hodges' dinner, Mrs. Evans called on Hester. It presaged a trickle of callers, increasing to a substantial number, as those who would be right followed those who were certain they were. All recognized Mrs. Evans as leader. She came from one of the oldest families of Kansas City, an aristocracy stemming from the beef barons who had made fortunes in Chicago's stockyards. With almost regal grandeur these families carried on their tradition of wealth.

Mrs. Evans, on the fringes of that wealth, was not actually recognized by the hierarchy, but in Colfax she maintained its high tradition.

A morning or two later, she telephoned Hester. "I'm going to ask you if you won't help me out, like a good friend, at my Thursday afternoon party. Mrs. Hodges tells me you play the violin. You see," she went on in intimate tones, "this is the week I always have my two parties—my entertaining for the season. With flowers and a caterer over from Kansas City, they fit into each other nicely. I wondered if you'd play."

"Why, yes, I'd be glad to," said Hester, happy that her playing could serve some functional purpose in their effort to find a footing in the town.

But when they arrived at the Evans' on Tuesday evening, Hester wondered if she had made a mistake in accepting the invitation to play, without hesitation. Had Mrs. Evans expected her to hold back a little? Hester could not otherwise account for the slight coolness in Mrs. Evans' manner.

Stephen, too, realized that his status had changed. He had the feeling that Mr. Evans would have been glad if this invitation to his house had not been given, and that it would not be repeated. His manner toward Stephen was one of cold aloofness.

The party gathered, much the same group which had been at the Hodges'.

The banker, in correct evening attire, stood before his fireplace, in which a fire of handsome logs was laid, but at this season of the year not lighted.

The butler brought in a tray of glasses.

"I think you'll find this pretty good stuff," said Evans in precise tones.

Lawyer Janes, standing near Stephen, put a hand on his shoulder. His eyes twinkled with amusement, as he looked from the austere Evans to Stephen. "It ought not to be hard for you to get in touch with our private bootlegger," he said, "with your connections."

With your connections? What did he mean by that? What would be his especial connection with bootleggers? Well, he ran an alcohol plant, didn't he?

The suspicion in Stephen's mind developed almost instantly into a certainty. A lot of heretofore unrelated happenings fitted together. Evidently it was an open secret in the town that the Alcohol Plant through Burton had supplied bootleggers. That was the gossip Burton had hinted at. It explained the attitude of the citizens in being slow to accept him. Most of them didn't like it. But when, under Stephen's management, the Plant had no longer any connection with bootleggers, men like Hodges and Evans had wanted to be friendly. Now their changed attitude toward him tonight made him as sure as he could be of anything that the Plant's bootlegging had begun again.

The irony of his position struck Stephen. Evans was evidently willing to buy bootleg liquor, but not willing to recognize socially anyone connected with bootlegging. Janes, on the other hand, thought he was smart to get his . . . Janes' wink had shown him that. But all of them, whether approving or disapproving, now thought that the bootleggers had found that he could be bought. Stephen felt giddy.

He heard Hodges say unconcernedly, "Guess we're going to have an early summer. This chap doesn't know what that means, does he?" He turned toward Stephen. "This is my advice to you—I've given it to Evans, but he never follows it. Never make a business decision between the first of July and the first of September."

"Seems like sound advice," said Stephen blandly. But to himself he was saying, well, it would take July and August, too, to straighten this mess out. There'd have to be decisions, all right.

Through the polite conversation of the dinner, his mind, beneath the surface, was busy over the problem. No doubt of it. The bootlegging had stopped for a time after Burton left. All his checks showed that. If it had begun again it

must have been very recently . . . begun, the weather vane of public opinion would indicate, at some time between the Hodges' dinner party, a week ago, and tonight. Who had risked starting it up with the Plant manager right on the job? He remembered Stretz and Burton with their heads close together. Was Burton carrying on through Stretz?

Well, he must stop thinking now, keep up his end of the talk. From Hester's troubled glance, he concluded he had not been doing so.

Once they had got beyond earshot, on their way home, he exclaimed, "Hester! I've found out what's wrong with us in this town."

"Are you sure you're right?" Hester asked, when he had explained. "It doesn't seem possible."

"I might be mistaken, but I don't think so. I'll be sure before I make a move, of course. In the meantime, I shan't stand very well with most of these people. But they may not include you in that estimate. Mrs. Evans evidently likes you."

"To a point," said Hester. "She was talking to Mrs. Janes when they thought I didn't hear—or maybe they did know I heard. There's a third party this week, to which I'm not invited. A little inner group, I gathered."

"Whew!" was Stephen's rejoinder. "I guess they'll have plenty to talk about."

"I wish I hadn't said I'd play for them Thursday."

"Well, better go through with it," said Stephen thoughtfully.

25

SINCE the Chases' coming to Colfax the days had been clear, in the wind a coolness as if it had blown over water. But the morning of Mrs. Evans' afternoon reception, the wind blew hot and dry, giving Hester a feeling of the slow heating up of immense stretches of prairie to the west.

Hester realized that she did not have the right clothes for such weather. She hunted up the thinnest dress she had, sheer, but black, one she had had last summer. She gave it rigid inspection. Clothes had a way of deteriorating from season to season and she felt the wrong dress, this afternoon, would be fatal. She was beginning to suspect that face was as important to a business man in this American town as it had been in China. The dress, she knew, suited her, and she hoped that its smartness would get her by.

The Kansas City butler opened the door for Hester. She passed through the hall and up the wide flight of stairs to the large front bedroom. She caught bits of conversation as she laid off her hat.

A pretty woman was examining the dress of a tall girl just come in. "Why, Sally! How smart you look. Chicago? Oh, New York, of course!"

Hester came down the stairs just behind a group of young matrons. Their frocks were in pastel summer shades, fitted for garden parties, and flowers such as filled Mrs. Evans' tall vases.

"You've outdone yourself, Auntie," said one of them in a whisper to Mrs. Evans standing at the door of the double parlors to greet her guests.

On Mrs. Evans' aging cheeks came a little flush of triumph. "Do you think so, Spinks, dear? Well, go in and be quiet. I've Mrs. Chase to play."

"Just wait here with me," she said to Hester. "We're going to begin right now."

The young matrons fluttered into chairs at the back of the room.

Hester looked at her audience, each set apart in her tight compartment of personal hope and ambition, each face set with the stony purpose of listening to good music. She felt ill at ease, knowing that they were passing judgment, as had the group two evenings ago, and that judgment would be harsh until Stephen succeeded in wiping out the illicit business

at the Plant. Then some door in her own tight compartment opened, and she knew also that there must be some bond of effort and experience that could unite them all. She lifted her violin.

Here and there, across the solid front of glazed attention, broke an expression of awareness, lost quickly when the perfunctory clapping began.

26

STEPHEN settled himself to a familiar task. All his years in China he had watched for the slow seeping away of oil. He must watch now for a like filtering away of alcohol. He was convinced that "squeeze" was what had sapped the profits of the Plant heretofore, and bid fair to do it again. And yet, he must withhold final judgment until he had checked and re-checked facts. To do this, he must take Seaton a little into his confidence.

Seaton was worried when he got a request from Stephen to come to the office at five. His mind jumped quickly to the conclusion that something was wrong with his work. But when he entered the office, there was no air of censure about Chase.

"There are one or two things I'd like to talk over with you," said Stephen, motioning Seaton to sit down. "You can help me, I think."

Seaton felt a slackening of his nervous drive. After all, Chase must have confidence in him. It steadied him, gave him back confidence in himself which he had lacked of late.

"First, let me say, I've the feeling that since the yeast went bad, you've felt you couldn't turn things over to Jones. We can't nurse him along, and my opinion is that he doesn't need it. He's working harder—am I right?"

"Well, he's just been married." Seaton smiled.

"You think that's steadied him?"

"I think Tiny—that's the girl he married—means him to make good. She's ambitious. Wants him to come up in the world."

"Suppose we give him his chance, then, to make good." After a pause, Stephen went on. "That will give you a little more time to make some tests for me. I believe I can trust you to say nothing of what I'm going to tell you. There seems to be a discrepancy in the amount of alcohol we have been getting lately from various distillations. Can you give me some ratios between amounts of corn and alcohol—keep careful records of the next few brews?"

"There'll always be a slight variation," said Seaton. "Corn into starch, starch into sugar, sugar into alcohol. A variant in the amount of starch in the corn."

"Yes, I know," said Stephen. "But I hardly think it would be as great as it appears to be. Could you manage to take tests from incoming loads of corn, so we can check up with the yields?"

"Yes, if you'd like me to."

As Seaton walked home, he kept thinking of what Chase had told him. Did the boss mean by discrepancy that he suspected dishonesty? But how could leakage occur, with a government inspector in the Plant all the time? Wasn't Chase going too far with his efficiency?

Seaton didn't like the idea of spying on the men in the Plant . . . at least, so this work Chase had asked him to do seemed to him. He knew them all. They seemed like pretty good scouts. Of course, there had always been a certain amount of gossip in the town. Bound to be over a product like alcohol, so profitable in the eyes of some people, so evil in the eyes of others.

To Seaton, shut away in his experiments, the changing of corn into alcohol was a responsibility. He had taken for granted that the other men felt responsible about it, too. It was distasteful to think that Chase suspected the men. He wasn't going to be a stool pigeon.

And then he had a very real sense of the humanity of Chase. It reassured him. Chase would feel he had a responsibility to his men. He had seen to it that Miss Wilson hadn't been in the office to eavesdrop on their talk.

I believe he took this moment to speak of Ted, too, on purpose, thinking that I might be suspicious of him, and he wanted to protect him, and after that yeast business, too. I can trust Chase. He'll not accuse anybody until he has actual proof of guilt.

Stephen had made his first real friend in the Plant.

27

YES, there was a discrepancy. Seaton's tests confirmed it.

Now Stephen determined he must put through his scheme of having a general superintendent in charge of all departments. He had the idea that with such a man he could so tighten up the discipline that dishonesty would be too dangerous. He would pull the discipline tighter and tighter, until there could be no loopholes. He wanted to get rid of the bootlegging without sacrificing any of his key-men.

He felt pretty certain that Stretz was the ringleader. How many more were involved he did not know, could not guess. At present, he trusted only Seaton. He had an idea, too, that Jones was probably straight. Slack with himself, but not naturally crooked. But Pat, the cooker runners, the men who weighed in the grain, even Bebbidge—they might all be in on it.

He did not wish to fire half his force—even if he had known which half to fire. Such experienced men as Stretz and Bebbidge were not easily replaced. And the men he got might be just as open to the temptation of bootlegging as these. Through all his business experience, Stephen had believed labor turnovers were the most expensive method of discipline.

Also, he must consider his position in the town. A wholesale dismissal might react against him and make it hard to get new men.

Stephen reached this point in his thinking early on the morning after he had received Seaton's report. He could hear Hester moving about in the kitchen. Tim was watching him through the bars of his crib. Stephen stirred.

Tim clambered expertly over the side of the crib, lowered himself to the floor, with a rush reached Stephen, sat astride his chest.

"Ouch!" cried Stephen.

The determined line of Tim's mouth widened into a smile, showing all his even little teeth.

"Get off my chest, Tim," and he tumbled his boy over and over, entangling him in the bedclothes, and escaped to the bathroom to shave.

He wrote Jo that morning, laying the whole situation before him, explaining the unfortunate reputation the Plant had in the town. First he took up the matter of the sewage. To remedy this would mean some little expenditure. Then he gave a concise account of the bootlegging that was going on, saying that he wanted to clean that out without firing his staff and explaining why. For the good of the business, he recommended to Jo that they take on another man, a superintendent who could keep a close watch on the Plant and assume responsibility when Stephen was off getting new accounts.

TUTTLE read Stephen's letter, pursed his lips in a skeptical pout. He wasn't at all sure that Steve's method of clean-up was as economical as he thought. Find out the dishonest ones, make an example of them. That would put the fear of the Lord into the others. He hoped Steve wasn't going to turn

out to be soft with his men or be too easy under the pressure a community often puts on a business. After all, what did he actually know about Steve as a business man? Old friend, yes; but business was business. He believed he'd better get another man's slant on these recommendations.

He rang for Tom. "Where's Appleton now, Tom? Is he anywhere near Colfax, Kansas?"

"Well, not very," said Tom. "Why? Chance of any sales there?"

"No. I just wanted him to look in on Steve and go over the Plant with him about some repairs."

"Appleton's about got his hands full, right now," Tom said. He considered a moment. "Why don't you send Jo out? Nice trip for him. We can spare him, too, and everybody else is pretty busy." It would get young Jo out from under his feet for a few days, thought Tom. Evidently there wasn't much of anything to the job. Decidedly a sideline, this taking on an alcohol plant. More old Jo's hobby than anything else.

"Well, perhaps I might." Wonder if Jo could do it, old Jo thought. I know he can get data together. "Ask him to come in, will you, Tom, if he's at his desk?"

"I take it what you want, Dad," said young Jo, "is a kind of check-up on Steve."

"Well, wouldn't put it that way, exactly. On the ground, you can see how necessary the things he suggests seem to be. Of course it's a little delicate. I don't want Steve to feel I don't trust his judgment. But you'll know how to manage that. You're good at that sort of thing. I'll wire Steve."

Young Jo was pleased, there was no denying it. Maybe he'd been wrong. Maybe the old man did figure he'd grown up after all. He had a sudden impulse to talk over with his father the problem, that, so far, he hadn't found any way to mention. Better butter him up a little first, though, to be on the safe side. "Sounds like a real job to me, Dad. I'll try to make good on it. I'd like to begin to take some responsibility."

"Well?" said Tuttle. "That's fine."

"Fact is," said young Jo, "I want to get married."

"Who to?"

"A girl you know and like. Your sort, Dad."

"Suppose you give me her name."

"Well, it's Mary."

"Mary?" exclaimed Tuttle. "What Mary?" He knew whom young Jo meant.

"Mary Trencher, of course."

"Well, there are other Marys." He studied his son. "Her people are farmers, aren't they?"

"Why, yes. Weren't ours, once?"

"Four generations back. We've made money since then. We're responsible for it now."

"I can't imagine anybody who'd take better care of it than Mary. She's a lot more thrifty than I am."

"What would she add to the family, Jo?"

"She's a fine musician. Isn't that enough?"

"Perhaps," said Tuttle. "I tell you, Jo. I've got nothing against the girl, as you know. In fact, I like her. Always have. But whether she's the one for you to marry, I don't know. I'd like to see a little more of her first. That your mother'll be upset you must realize."

Jo looked his father squarely in the eyes. "I'll play along with you, Dad, on account of Mother. But—" he hesitated a moment—"Mary's the best thing that ever happened to me. I need her."

Old Jo was moved. Never since his son had been a child had he taken him into his confidence. He felt that to back Jo up now would be to come closer to him than he ever had. But there was too much at stake here. As a friend, he was all for Mary. She had stamina and she knew how to work. Suddenly he wondered how much of that orchestra idea had been hers. Looking down, he saw young Jo's well-manicured hands spread out flat on the desk as he leaned eagerly forward, and for some reason they angered him. If Jo wasn't going to

be worth anything in the business, then damn it, the best thing he could do was to marry into the moneyed group, as Jane had, interlock two families whose names meant something. In the rush of his disappointment, Tuttle lashed out at his son. "Why in hell, Jo, when you begin to talk about responsibility, can't you do the one thing we ask of you?"

"And what would that be?" asked young Jo politely.

"Consider us in the girl you pick out to marry."

"Okay, Dad," said young Jo. "I thought maybe we could get together on it." He turned and went out.

Well, Jane had come to her senses. Probably Jo would in time.

29

JO HAD telephoned that he was going out to Colfax for a few days. Too busy to come down to see her before he left.

"Is anything wrong, Jo?" asked Mary, too keen not to suspect that there was some reason for his not coming to say good-by.

"Tell you about it when I get back," he said. "Had a little dust-up with Pop."

For a moment, remembering how Jane had been separated from Celly, Mary turned cold. "You'll be back soon, Jo?"

"Don't worry. I'll drift in in a few days. 'By, darling."

The city seemed very empty to Mary with Jo away. More and more her life had been revolving around Jo. In some strange way, he was crowding out of her life all other associations. An idle person, she saw, was more absorbing than a busy one. She was losing touch with her other friends. It was inevitable that she should lose it with Jim. When he had last come to see her, she had told him of Jo. It had seemed the only honest thing to do. As for Jerry and Lennie, they were going with a smart young business crowd which didn't interest her.

STEPHEN was a little surprised at Tuttle's wire. He had assumed that Jo would accept his recommendations without question. But, after all, it was natural that a shrewd man like Jo would want a second opinion before he undertook the not inconsiderable added expense. What young Jo's opinion would be worth he wasn't so sure. Well, Jo was probably sending the boy out to get experience. He'd see he got it. Delays me a little, that's all, he thought. Or does it? Young Jo would probably have authority to make decisions. It might save correspondence and, in the end, time.

Young Jo got off the morning train looking very debonair. "Nice country out here," was his greeting. "You know, I've only been up and down the east coast, since I've been old enough to remember anything. Maine to Florida's the Tuttle's beat. You can really stretch your legs here, can't you?"

"Shall I take you home first, or shall we get down to business?" asked Stephen.

"Oh, business, by all means," said Jo.

"Well, then, I'd like you to see the Plant. You'll get an idea of the set-up and why a superintendent is necessary," Stephen said, as they drove through Colfax.

Young Jo, still stinging under his father's outburst, didn't care very much whether he did anything more than agree with Steve. Steve knew what he was about. Jo guessed he hadn't been sent here for any very profound reason anyway. But he wasn't his father's son for nothing. Once within the Plant, with Stephen pounding information into him as fast as he could talk, Jo began to wake up, to take an interest. Stephen expected him to get what was going on, what type of men he had to deal with, a half-dozen other things, with the minimum of explanation.

Steve's no slouch, Jo said to himself. He was expecting quick, accurate thinking, and by gad, he'd give it to him.

"Suppose we drive around the town a little before we go home," said Stephen. "What I'd like to see you do for me," he went on as soon as they were in the car and safely out of earshot, "is this."

See *me* do for him? thought Jo. Then he had a curious feeling that today he stood in the same place of authority as his father did. It gave him a sense of dignity he had never had before. He wished his father *had* given him the authority to act. He wondered how he'd feel if he could say, "Go ahead, Steve." What he did say was, "You've convinced me, Steve, and I'll put up as strong a case as possible to Dad."

"If your father agrees, and I believe he will see the plan's economy in the long run, what I need is an honest man, one who can't be bought himself and one used to handling men."

"Isn't that a rather large order?" asked Jo.

"I've got a man in mind," said Stephen. "Stackpole's his name. If he's out of a job now, then he's honest." In a few words he told Jo of the effort that had been made to get Stackpole out of the merger and why.

"I see," said Jo. He was thinking, So that's why Steve left the merger. Another man they couldn't buy. Aloud he said, "I take it you want to get started on this clean-up as soon as you can. What would you say to my catching the night train back to New York? I'll put all this up to Dad, and get in touch with Stackpole for you."

"Well," said Stephen, "we were hoping you'd stay a few days, Jo. But I've got to move fast. Hester and I'd better drive you over to Kansas City tonight, I guess. That's your best connection." Stephen had a better opinion of young Jo than he'd ever had before. He's got stuff in him. I wonder if his fecklessness is a pose?

The friendship between the two grew that day. It included Hester, too. As she got an early dinner for them so they could get off for Kansas City, Jo followed Stephen out into the kitchen, Tim at their heels.

"You ought to put this male trio to work," said Jo. He

lifted an apron from the hook on the back of the door. "What can we do?"

"Oh, Stephen's no good at this sort of thing," said Hester. "He just gets underfoot. I wasn't much good either to begin with," she added.

"Softy!" said Jo to Stephen. "Oriental splendor got to you, I see." He put the apron on Stephen, tying it in an elaborate bow. "Now, sir!" he said, "you can be my stooge while I make the salad. Come here, Tim." He lifted Tim to the edge of the table. "You watch him. If he doesn't work, just you tell me."

Together they got the dinner. Hester and Stephen caught Jo's gaiety. It seemed to them both that he was a very dear friend indeed, living as they were in the guarded atmosphere of suspicion which surrounded them.

"Mary sent you a lot of messages," Jo told Hester. He didn't believe she had, actually, any more than just her love, but he reasoned that she would have if they'd had time to talk, and it gave him a chance to mention Mary. He continued to think of innumerable interesting things to tell Hester about her. "She's going to play solo in the next broadcast," he said, with a glow of pride.

"Now look, Jo," said Hester, her eyes full of amusement. "You can just tell me you love Mary, if you want to."

Jo grinned. "When we get married, we'll come out here on our honeymoon."

But underneath persisted the small, niggling doubt—what in the end would his family do to this love of his?

The sun was shining in slanting rays across the fields as they drove toward Kansas City. The trees and the osage orange hedges cast long shadows over the bright green of the June cornfields. Jo was sitting in the front seat with Stephen, Hester and Tim in the back. They seemed to have talked themselves out and rode for miles without speaking, in a quiet enjoyment of one another's presence.

The land lay about them in undulating folds. The houses,

Jo noted, were for the most part small, but on a rounded knoll where it had unbroken view on four sides, stood a tall, three-storied house, commanding the scene from its Captain's Walk on the flat roof. Strange to see, a thousand miles from the ocean, the high, railed platform of the New England sea-coast dwelling. "I'll bet a man with a sea-going grandfather built that house," said Jo. "Now, if I had a chance, I'd copy my grandfather. He was kind of a simple guy."

Stephen glanced at him, about to reply lightly to this facetious remark. But Jo was looking off over the prairie, his face serious and wistful. Wonder what's on his mind, thought Stephen.

Both Hester and Stephen were loath to let Jo go and stayed until the train pulled out. He watched them turn, go back through the station, Stephen carrying Tim. A life just as homely and ordinary as that was what he would like for himself and Mary. He'd like to have had the break his father was giving to Steve.

31

"WELL, hello! You made good time," said old Jo in surprise, as his son entered the office a day earlier than he had expected.

"Young man eager to make good," said Jo, in his most flippant tone. He was trying to pass off the awkwardness of the moment, remembering how they had parted.

"Well, to get down to facts," Jo went on, "what Steve wants seems pretty sound. Here's what he's up against." He remembered Stephen's concise phrases, used them to his father.

Old Jo hammered away at his son, making him prove every point. At last he said, "I'm satisfied, Jo. You've done a good job. I'll wire Steve to go ahead."

All the way east on the train young Jo had kept remembering the sense of dignity he had felt in the presence of Stephen,

which had persisted even after Stephen had found out he had no real authority. Throughout the day, Stephen had treated him as his business equal, something neither Tom nor his father had ever done. An idea had taken shape in Jo's mind that had dazzled him with its simplicity and its effectiveness in relation to his problems. If I can put it through, he'd thought, in the end it might mean a way out for Mary and me.

Now, back in the old atmosphere of the office, his plan seemed better than ever to him. "Dad, I'd like to work with Steve. This job out there, why can't I have it?"

Old Jo stared at him. "Look here, Jo, you've given me a report that shows you grasped the situation out there. What could you do with a lot of hard-boiled workmen? They'd pull the wool over your eyes without half trying. They'd make a fool of you. The cards are stacked enough against Steve, without making him take on an inexperienced man. Don't you understand if Steve took you on it would be because I asked him to? It isn't my idea of a square deal for Steve, nor would it be good business."

Jo flushed. He saw himself as he must look to old Jo—undercutting Steve. He certainly hadn't meant to. But he hadn't even told his father that Steve had a man picked for the job. He did now, feeling that he had further discredited himself.

There came over Tuttle a great sense of discouragement about his son. In whatever Jo attempted, he always got side-tracked by the impractical. And something more . . . old Jo was hurt. The boy preferred working with Stephen to working with him.

As STEPHEN had guessed, Stackpole was no longer with the merger. At last young Jo traced him down, called him on the telephone, made an appointment to see him.

He drove up to the Bronx in his car, Mary with him. "We'll get out in the country as soon as I'm through," he told her.

They found at last the short street where Stackpole lived, drew up before a small store, a pet shop obviously, for puppies were crawling around over littered straw in the window. Cages hung from the ceiling within the shop. A stout, grey-haired woman was covering them for the night. She motioned Jo toward a door at the back.

For a long time Mary waited in the car, watching the old woman tend her shop. There was a constant jingling of the bell over the door. Children ran in, laying down nickels and dimes on the counter for bird seed or dog biscuit. Women drifted in to talk. From time to time the shopkeeper walked vigorously to the rear door, disappearing into the room beyond. Once Mary heard her rich Irish voice raised dramatically in argument.

At last Jo came out, with him a small, stooped old man, talking to Jo even after he was seated in the car. "I'll write Mr. Chase. It's certainly kind of him. I'll see he ain't disappointed."

"Well, that's settled," said Jo, as they drove away.

"He took it, then?"

"I'll say. And did the old lady jump at it, too! She pretended to be sore—all but threw me out. But it's my guess the old gentleman's lost without his job and she wants him to have one."

The car stood again on that small sand beach. Ten months since Jo and Mary had made a pact that they wouldn't go against the wishes of the older Tuttle. It was harder now than it had been then. Mary felt she hadn't needed to be hurt then. Jo's mother was an obstacle, but she didn't really care whether Mrs. Tuttle liked her or not. That Jo's father was against her—that hurt.

Jo sensed a withdrawal in Mary. It was the last thing he needed to convince him he was a bungler.

"I thought I was smart a year ago, Mary. I had an idea I could go places."

"Go places? Haven't you, Jo?"

Jo slid down in his seat. "Lord, no. Dad made that pretty plain to me this morning. I thought I had a swell idea to put myself over—to put us over, really. I suppose I hadn't thought it through. I sprung it on Dad, and it knocked over everything I've tried to do to make him trust me."

"What was it, Jo?"

"Oh, heck, I'm ashamed of it, really." Then he told her. "You know I wouldn't undercut Steve for anything," he finished.

Mary was a little aghast for a moment and then she was deeply moved. It *had* been a hare-brained scheme, but behind it was a legitimate desire in Jo to take over his own life. If he had had the experience to handle the job, the idea would have been good. That he didn't have that experience—or any experience in the world of effort—was his father's fault. Suddenly she was furiously angry at old Jo Tuttle. "Your father won't, or can't, see, Jo, what you really are! Look what you've done in the last year! Who's responsible, after all, for that broadcast? That's a big thing, Jo."

"Father thinks you were," said Jo.

"Well, I wasn't! It was you who thought of it. It was you who thought of having Vera lead the orchestra. Where would she ever have got the chance, if it hadn't been for you? And me, Jo, look what you've done for me. Think what being in that orchestra has meant. You do it all the time for people, Jo. That old man up in the Bronx tonight—I saw how he looked at you. I'd be willing to bet that Hester and Stephen are happier because you were there. Jo, darling . . . don't worry about us. There's plenty of time. I'll wait till you get things straightened out."

Jo's hands, lax on the steering wheel, had tightened. "Well, Mary," he said, with a curiously boyish break in his voice, "alone, I probably wouldn't bother to go very far. But with

you"—he stopped, then, in the darkness, chuckled suddenly. "I guess it's got to be done."

33

ON A HOT, sultry morning, Stephen drove over to the station to meet Stackpole. The air was saturated with moisture from last night's showers. Along the horizon a black cloud was mounting, with menacing low rumbles of thunder. There'd be another shower increasing the mugginess of the day, decreasing Stephen's powers of decision. And on this important day when he must carry through the ticklish details of bringing into the Plant an outside man.

As the train stopped, Stephen saw the bent little man hop energetically down from the steps of the day coach.

"How are you, Stackpole?" he said, holding out his hand in cordial greeting.

Stackpole shook it vigorously. "I appreciate this, Mr. Chase," he said.

"Charles!" came loudly from the car vestibule, "take this bird-cage and help me out of here before I'm carried farther off into this Godforsaken country!"

Stackpole turned, reached up his hand to receive a bird-cage, then another, set them down on the platform, then finally helped down a stalwart old lady, presumably Mrs. Stackpole. Stephen realized that he had never thought of a Mrs. Stackpole, but now that he saw her, he knew she was very much to be considered. She looked as old-world as if she had just arrived from Ireland. She was sturdy and indomitable. Her shaggy white eyebrows were as thick as thatch, above shrewd, deeply blue eyes.

"So, young man," she addressed Stephen, "you're the one who got us into this."

At that moment the storm broke, lightning cut across the

sky in lines of jagged flame. A clap of thunder seemed to burst right at their feet. The birds in the cages fluttered against the bars.

"Charles," said Mrs. Stackpole, "we must get them away from this." She picked up one bird-cage, handing it to Stackpole, took the other herself, walked down the platform toward the baggage car.

"Wife's had a pet shop in the Bronx," explained Stackpole, following after with Stephen. "She's brought her business along."

The baggage man, grinning, set down a cage of white mice, a box with a slatted front holding a monkey, a small kennel that would fit nothing larger than a Chinese sleeve dog, thought Stephen. He groaned inwardly. He hadn't expected a circus troupe. He'd wanted Stackpole to be as inconspicuous as possible.

Oblivious of the storm, Mrs. Stackpole knelt before the kennel. "Poochie, Poochie," she murmured, hunting in her bulging purse for keys. She opened the cover of the kennel and extracted a tiny Mexican hairless dog. The rain broke in a spatter around them, then pounded down in sharp, cutting hail.

"Load everything into my car," Stephen shouted above the uproar to the baggage man.

"Hello. What you got there?" The hotel manager looked not too kindly on the menagerie which had been deposited in the lobby.

"I guess we'll leave you and Mrs. Stackpole to work out arrangements. I'm due at the Plant," Stephen told him, beating a hasty retreat with Stackpole.

The men had just been coming into the Plant when the storm broke.

"Whew!" said Stretz. "She's a humdinger! Worse'n last night."

They gathered in a little knot under the sheds, pulling on their overalls.

"Ain't no grain goin' to come in until this-yer blow gets itself finished," said one of the handlers.

The hail rattled on the tin roof.

"Don't look like any band concert tonight, either."

"When's that band coming over from Jordanville, Fred?" asked Pat.

"My God! We ain't going to have them, if I have my way," said Stretz, "and I told Hodges so. They ain't got no instruments but clarinets. Sound like the wind blowin' through the bunghole of a barrel. You can't get good band music without basses. They ain't got but one bass, and that's one a them big frog horns, and the feller's got false teeth."

A guffaw greeted this sally.

Bebbidge came around the corner of the shed, his coat collar turned up against the rain. "You fellers better quit chewin' the fat and get busy," he said, slatting the water off his hat. "The new foreman got in on the morning train."

"Oh, he did, did he?" said Fred. "Well, I guess that's the beginning. Us local boys better look out."

"Watch your mouth." The weigh-master standing near Fred nudged him.

Fred swung around quickly.

The heavy iron door into the Plant had opened. Chase stood there, at his side a wiry little man past middle age.

"Boys, this is Mr. Stackpole, our new foreman. I'll bring him around to your departments this afternoon."

The little twerp! Fred said to himself, with tremendous relief. Easy money to wear him down. He ain't young.

Fred had been frightened that Chase suspected what was going on. He'd gone over every step . . . their great care, the small amounts of alcohol drained off. No one would ever notice. Ever since Chase had explained to the heads of departments his scheme of centralization, Fred had fortified himself with this thought.

I guess I got scared of my shadow. That ol' feller is past his usefulness. Bet he's been given this job as a kind of pension,

sent down here because the big boss in New York owed him something.

34

THE introduction of Stackpole to his work didn't turn out to be as difficult as Stephen had feared. The critical first day passed off smoothly. Stephen noticed no resentment on the part of the men that an outsider had been given this top job. Even Stretz was more affable than usual. As for Blanche Wilson, Stackpole had seen immediately to making friends with her. He hadn't handled all those women in the warehouse for nothing.

The pet shop proved to be a help rather than a hindrance, as Stephen at first had feared it would be. It centered the town's attention on Mrs. Stackpole. With the energy some fat women have, she was settled in three days in a vacant store with a large display window. From morning until night, children flattened their noses against it, watching the endless antics of the monkey and the mice. The men joked Stackpole about his trained animals.

Stephen felt a great load off his mind. He'd made no mistake in his man.

At first, Stackpole appeared as easy as Stretz had hoped he would be. As he moved about the Plant, talking to the men, he displayed just enough knowledge of the alcohol process to give point to the questions he asked.

It was Bebbidge who gave him the name by which he went among the men. "I like the little cuss," Bebbidge said to Pat. "Who'd you mean?"

"Oh, come off! This Hop-o'-my-Thumb foreman we got from New York."

Pat grinned. "Yeh," he said. "I never see such a mosquito for gettin' around. I expect to see him rise up out of one of my vats, one of these days."

The name was shortened to "Tom Thumb," and stuck. Good-naturedly the men applied it, grinning to themselves as they turned to confront Stackpole's sudden appearances. But when Stretz got hold of the name, he turned it into the ridiculous, mimicking Stackpole's bent back.

Stackpole gave no sign of how much he knew, or that his brain behind his bright eyes was recording, ticketing, docketing the men by their casual talk of their work, their homes, their families.

"I guess I about got their numbers," he told Stephen at the end of a week. "I don't know yet who's in on it, but I know which ones like money too much and which ones it don't matter so much to. About the percentage of honest folks you get in any place, I'd say, but a little more than the usual percentage being dishonest just now, because they got more than usual to gain by it. Guess we better give 'em a warning that we're on and see what happens."

The next day as they were weighing in grain on the unloading platform, from behind the weigh-master came a dry, snapped-off command. "Better check that again."

Like a current of cold air the word traveled over the Plant. "Tom Thumb ain't so easy as he seems."

The ratio between corn and alcohol became normal. But neither Stackpole nor Stephen felt any assurance that it would stay so.

"Men don't usually give up easy money without a fight," Stackpole said.

"That's about the way I see it," answered Stephen. "Playing straight is a luxury they can't afford at this late date. Comes a little high, sometimes."

A grin of understanding passed between the two men.

"Have you any idea how they get the alcohol out?" asked Stephen.

"Not yet. The amounts drawn off from the tanks and what's left seem to check. As soon as the new gauges come, I'll put them on the storage tanks. I've got a hunch it's done

from outside the buildings. Too risky to tamper with the pipes inside."

Waiting for the slow, careful closing in on the men called for all the patience Stephen had. Sometimes he felt he must take matters into his own hands and try to hurry the investigation. But it was Stackpole's job, and it might be a long one. Stephen wondered if they'd tipped their hand a little too soon by cracking down on the weigh-master. Caution had closed over the eyes of the men like visors.

35

THE hot days, the nights with the house not cooling off until well after midnight, wore Hester's controls down.

If we could just get over this first hurdle, she thought, going about her housework, beads of perspiration standing on her upper lip. If we could just prove we don't know anything about the bootlegging. Even Mrs. Hodges thinks we're in on it, I'm sure. She isn't as cordial as she was.

Hester stepped out on the back porch to see where Tim was. No slightest sound in the garden. She called. There was no answer. She ran quickly to the gate, shading her eyes. Down the street she saw a familiar little figure standing alone. From the trees along the parkway across the road, heads popped out. A chant of derision arose. Tim's back straightened. She saw him throw something—a baby's throw that didn't get his missile farther than the curb. Then he turned, running toward her.

She gathered him up in her arms. He was too heavy for her to carry, but she managed somehow, bent far back with her load. His heart beat hard against the bones of her chest, his soft hair brushed her chin.

"It's my pants," sobbed Tim. "The kids say they're sissy."

"It wouldn't have happened if you'd stayed in the garden, darling. You're too little to be out in the street." She set

him down by the kitchen sink, bathing his face smudged with tears and dirt.

"I'm a big boy," said Tim, struggling with his sobs.

"Never mind," said Hester. "We'll do something nice. You choose what to do."

Tim weighed the matter. "Go see the monkey!"

The heat mounting through the hours of the morning and the early afternoon was reaching its peak now at three o'clock, before it slowly leveled out for the long stretch until midnight.

"Awful hot, ain't it?" Hester heard the men along the streets say, as they mopped their heads, fanned themselves with their hats. "But it's great corn weather." The town seemed secure in its well-being, for the moist, enervating heat, which exhausted their bodies and destroyed their sleep, ripened the fields of corn stretching away over the prairies.

In Mrs. Stackpole's shop, the little dog's red tongue licked the air, the monkey swung on his bar and scolded. Mrs. Stackpole's corsetless figure spread itself amply over her chair. She had a big palm-leaf fan and she used it vigorously. There was about her a kind of sturdy, deathless old age.

"It's glad I am to see you," she exclaimed. "I was thinking of the Bronx. Forty years we lived there. The people here, they don't know my ways and I don't know theirs. There's no business for me here, but I'm used to having a counter in front of me, and I can't give it up." After a pause, she added, "In the Bronx, I had me old friends." Her bright old eyes settled on Hester.

"I know," said Hester simply.

"Oh, my, my sakes!" said Tim, staring at the monkey. His deep breath of wonder and delight ended in a little hic-cough.

"Been crying? For shame!" said Mrs. Stackpole.

Tim looked at her, then came over, confidently laid his hand on her big knee. "They said it was my pants," he told her solemnly. "I fought 'em."

"Their mothers ought to know they're teasing a little boy," said Hester indignantly, finishing her story of Tim's troubles.

Mrs. Stackpole looked at Tim, a twinkle in her blue eyes. "So ye fought, did ye?"

"Yes," said Tim. "I throwed a rock."

"You're a foine boy. You'll grow up to be a foine man, like your father, a friend to poor people. Go along, Mrs. Chase, get his hair cut like the other boys. Get him some overhauls. Make him look like the rest of them. It'll help his manhood."

"What we got here?" Stephen asked that evening.

Timothy's feet looked very small below the legs of the new overalls. His cropped head looked small, too.

"Daddy, I throwed a rock." Tim was finding it profitable to boast of his prowess. Of his retreat he said nothing.

The evening seemed too hot to read, even too hot to smoke. After Tim had gone to bed, Hester and Stephen sat out on the porch at the back of the house, hoping for a little breeze that sometimes came through the garden.

"Mrs. Stackpole's right," said Stephen. "Tim's got to make his way, just as we have."

Hester did not answer. She was thinking she didn't have a baby any longer. She'd carried him for the last time. Her back still ached from his weight, carrying him up the walk. His babyhood seemed pretty short, and very dear.

BETWEEN brews, on a night when no one was in the Plant, Stackpole put new float gauges on the storage tanks. He hoped the men wouldn't notice. He checked minutely the reading on the gauges. For a week there was nothing irregular. Then one morning the delicate gauge on Number Three

tank registered a fraction of an inch lower than it had the night before.

Ah, said Stackpole to himself. Now we're getting somewhere.

"What they're doing," he told Stephen, "is drawing off alcohol from tank Number Three. There must be an outlet pipe. We can dig down and cut it."

"But that's only half the picture," Stephen answered. "Where does the pipe lead?"

It must be some place not too far away, Stackpole figured, where they were working under cover. He didn't think they could have got the pipe very far.

A row of houses on the edge of the Negro district stood close along the steel fence of the Plant. Their cover would probably be in one of those houses. But which one? They all seemed to be lived in—that is, they all had curtains up. Stackpole began taking walks around the neighborhood at night, discovered that there was one house that never was lighted. He set himself to watch that house.

One night, standing in an angle two sheds made, he thought he caught a glimmer of light in a cellar window. He stole along the side of the house, but the cellar window was inky black, evidently covered from the inside with some kind of thick stuff. But he could hear a faint movement within.

Stackpole went back to the sheds. In the sultry black night, heat lightning played, illuminating the grain shaft of the Plant, tall and white.

If it flashes just right, I might see anyone coming out. On the other hand, they might see me. Stackpole pressed himself farther into his corner and waited. At last he heard a key softly turning in the lock, and then the swish of men's feet through the weeds. They were very near him, but formless—only a heavier blackness moving. No lightning played across the sky.

He went back to the storage tank, took careful note of the

gauge. In the hour he had been away, it had dropped a little.

"Well, I guess I got their set-up," he said to Stephen after Miss Wilson had gone the next afternoon. "I've got enough evidence to risk putting the Federal officers wise. Get them to close in on the house."

Stephen sat for a while thinking. "If we do that, Stackpole, we send the men to prison, and we cripple the Plant. I can't know who did it, for if I do and don't tell, I'm in trouble, too."

"Well," said Stackpole, "we can cut the pipe at the tank."

"Yes," said Stephen. "But somehow in stopping this job of bootlegging, I've got to scare the men so badly that there won't be any repeats. It's something I learned in China—what I'm trying to do," he explained. "Save every man's face and yet let every man know he's watched. Here," he said, "we've been talking about just where to lay our new sewer. Why not along the steel fence on that side? We'd catch that underground pipe, wouldn't we?"

"We would. We won't say why we're diggin'." Stackpole nodded, with a twinkle of dry humor in his eyes. "And we'll dig slow."

37

THE night had been the hottest of the season. The sun, an hour after rising, jumped the temperature well over the hundred mark. Even in the office, Stephen's shirt was wet through in the moment the electric fan swinging in its orbit threw the cool air over Miss Wilson's desk.

Inside the Plant, the heat and steam from the boiling mash sent the temperature still higher. Sweat pouring from the men hour after hour for days had taken the surplus flesh from the stouter ones, had left the thin ones like Seaton and Stretz gaunt and lean. Only Stackpole seemed untouched. The heat loosened his rheumatic joints, sent a current of en-

ergy through his sparse frame. The younger men were no match for him. For five days now he had watched the progress of the new sewer ditch. The heat was playing into his hands.

In a sweat that had to do with fear as much as heat, Stretz waited. Was Chase on to him, or that shrimp, Stackpole? They'd find that outlet pipe sure as hell today. It was only a question of time till they dug into it. If he'd had a month, he'd have got clear. He couldn't get a break, nohow.

"What's all this digging mean?" Ted asked him, on his way to the laboratory.

"It's none of my business," snapped Stretz.

"Oh, come off!" said Ted, his bright, shoe-button eyes that saw everything taking on a little extra gleam. "You told me it was safe. Don't dodge now. You'd better make it your business how you're going to get us out of this."

"Keep your shirt on. Finding that pipe won't prove nothin' on anybody."

Once in the laboratory, Ted got into his white coat with an irritable thrust of his shoulders. "Damn this hot weather!"

Paul watched him, wondering. "What's the matter?" he asked.

"Don't pretend you don't know what it's all about. What's Chase having that ditch dug for?"

"Suppose we leave that to Chase."

"Oh, all right. We'll wait then, and see who goes to jail."

"Nobody's going to jail," Seaton answered.

"The hell they won't!"

"That's my hunch. I don't mean Chase is any softy, though."

"You can just bet your bottom dollar he isn't!" Ted, remembering Stephen's keen, penetrating look when he'd got after him about the yeast, saw no hope for himself when the final showdown came. Chase wouldn't rest till he'd found out who was swiping alcohol. There wouldn't be any use in trying to explain how defenseless Tiny had seemed that day.

Ted walked over to the window, stood looking out at the great storage tanks. So much wealth stored in them, as he saw it, just to benefit one man off in New York. Why shouldn't Tiny have a chance to be happy? He hadn't meant to be crooked. He'd only wanted his cut—the share any man ought to have—of the money there was in the world.

Paul studied his drooped shoulders, and for the first time wondered if Ted was in on it. No! Couldn't be. Even Chase didn't think so. "Why are you so upset?" he asked finally.

Ted swung around. "Who said I was? Well, why shouldn't I be? Chase is just as likely to accuse me as anybody, or you, for that matter. How can we prove we weren't in on it, if Chase wants to pin it on us?"

"You're all stirred up over nothing, Ted. Come on, let's get to work."

Ted walked over to the icebox, kicking viciously at a fifty-gallon yeasting tank on his way. But as he took the yeast cultures growing in test tubes from their compartment, Seaton noticed that his touch was the delicate, careful touch of the trained worker. Ted had learned a lot about his job in the last two months.

38

HOUR after hour Stephen and Stackpole tightened the suspense. Toward noon, they had the ditch diggers close to the hidden pipe leading out from tank Number Three, if their calculations were right.

"Lay off there," called Stackpole to the men. Then he went for Stephen. They stood for a long time studying the ditch. Still conferring, they returned to the office.

"I don't know any more than you do," said Blanche, when Fred waylaid her on the way to lunch. "I ain't been able to hear one word they've said."

About one, as the men were coming back to work, they

went out again to the ditch, Stackpole talking in low tones, pointing out to Stephen a spot in line with the storage tanks.

Bebbidge, on the way to the tool house for some extra parts, met Stephen as he returned. Stephen passed without speaking. Bebbidge felt a sudden shock of amazement. Never had he seen Chase with his mouth set in so stern a line. Until now, Bebbidge hadn't felt concerned for himself. It suddenly struck him that Fred might get him into it. He'd be out of a job and maybe in jail. In the eyes of the law, would he be held guilty?

The tension grew. Everyone in the Plant felt something was up. Along in the afternoon, heat and uncertainty had brought the men almost to hysteria. They began to have accidents. Pat, dodging around the pipes on the cooker deck, lost his footing, fell against a hot pipe, burned his arm. They sent for Hodges. As he finished bandaging Pat's arm, the weigh-master came in with a mashed finger. Hodges gave Stephen a quick, angry look. He was driving his men, and on a day like this! "What are you trying to do, Chase?" he asked.

Stephen made no answer. He wasn't through yet. Keep it up till five o'clock.

The ditch diggers had come to the spot where Stackpole believed the pipe would be found. He increased his vigilance. Looking down, he saw the gleam of its rounded surface. "Better go easy there," he called. "Level out more along the other end of the ditch till quitting time."

Fifteen minutes later a truck drove in, filled with drain tile.

"We'll lay tile tomorrow," Stackpole told the men.

The news spread quickly that what was up was the new sewage system to carry off sludge.

Stephen watched the force leaving the Plant. They were lighting up cigarettes and pipes. The hands of some of them shook a little.

"Christ, it's been a hot day!" The words came in a kind of high cackle from Stretz.

I guess they're licked. Stephen turned to get his own hat. Anyway, they ought to be. He was so tired himself he felt he could hardly drag one foot after the other.

Hester had stopped the car just in front of the entrance to the Plant. She leaned back with satisfaction. She'd parked the car at the curb for the first time alone, and done it well. Suddenly she felt a terrific bump from the rear. She jumped out quickly. The car behind was full of children, the woman at the wheel sitting there as if she were too terrified to move.

"It's nothing very much," said Hester. "Your bumper's locked into mine. I think maybe if you back up a little, you may be able to pull free."

"Oh, Mrs. Chase!" The woman was almost crying. "I don't know what Fred will say, my running into *you*! You are Mrs. Chase, aren't you? Fred wouldn't like it."

"Never mind," Hester assured her. "We'll get ourselves untangled before our husbands come out."

Mrs. Stretz started the car in a frantic attempt to get loose. The machines came apart with a jar. "There's Fred, now!"

Stephen, coming out of the Plant just then, stood next to Stretz on the sidewalk. "No harm done," he said. "Good night, Stretz." He got into his own car.

As Stretz slid into the seat beside Eva, his jangled nerves gave way. "For God's sake, Eva, why can't you learn to drive? You would run into the boss tonight!"

"Why, Fred, what ails you? I thought he was real nice about it."

"Nice!" snorted Fred. Suddenly he hated Stephen.

STACKPOLE worked late that night. He cut the pipe in the bottom of the ditch, plugged it, stopping the flow of alcohol.

Then, calculating its direction, he followed it back to the tank and cut it off at the source.

Stretz hung about town, afraid to visit the house and afraid not to. He waited until well along in the night before he called up Ted from a pay station.

"I've got some business on, Tiny," said Ted, coming back from the telephone.

"At this time of night?" said Tiny. "What are you up to, Ted Jones?"

"Listen, Tiny." He sat down on the side of the bed. "You know that furniture payment. I had to get the money for it in a hurry."

Tiny's blue eyes opened wide. "Ted, you didn't steal it, did you?"

"Don't be a dope. I been bootlegging."

"Why, Ted! Have we made much out of it?"

"Well, enough to tide us over. But the set-up's gone sour and I've got to get out from under."

"My!" said Tiny. She lay down docilely pulling the sheet up to her chin. "Do be careful, Ted."

"Okay." The door shut softly behind him.

Between admiration and fright, Tiny waited for his return.

On a corner of a side street in the sleeping town, Stretz and Ted met.

"We got to move quick," said Fred, "before they do. We got to get that cellar cleaned out tonight."

"Aw, come off," said Ted. "They'll be watching tonight."

"If they are, it's our hard luck," said Fred. "They'll nab us sure. But if they ain't, we got this chance to clean out before they spot the house. If they get hold of that stuff in there, they can trace some of it right back to us through the hardware store. We can load it all into our two cars. Come on, we ain't got any time to waste."

They did the job in feverish haste. The pipe was cut outside the house, the spigot taken away from within. Bottles,

containers, pipes, anything that would look suspicious were dumped in the river. As they came back from the last trip, they separated at the edge of town, one car coming in from the south, the other from the north. A first faint light was beginning to creep into the east.

As Ted slipped into his house, he felt Tiny's arms go around his neck. "Oh, darling, I've been so scared. Are you all right?" she said.

"Don't I seem to be?" said Ted.

Tiny sniffed. "You smell like a brewery. You better go take a bath."

Coming back from his bath, Ted lay wearily down beside Tiny, put his cheek against hers. "You're okay, Tiny."

Fred lay sleepless beside Eva's ample self. Maybe someone was spyin' on us tonight. In the half-light of the dawn, he watched the slow rise and fall of Eva's bosom under her thick cotton nightgown. A man always has to pay, he told himself. Of course Eva can go straight. What reason has she had not to? If I get clear of this, I'll be damned if I take any more risks for her and the kids.

"Yep. Got everything shipshape and tight," Stackpole reported to Stephen. "I shadowed that house last night, and they moved everything out. I'd say we can consider the thing finished. They can't hook up another pipe without our knowing it, of course."

"It's a good job, Stackpole," said Stephen. "I take it you know who did it?"

"Yep."

"Keep it under your hat. I checked one more loophole today. I suggested to the government inspector that he ask for a transfer."

"Yep," said Stackpole. "I figured he'd probably have to be in on it."

THE summer was nearly over. Stephen and Hester walked over to the park to hear the band concert, taking Tim with them. They had listened heretofore from the back porch, catching little drifts of sound across the garden. It wasn't easy to get anyone to stay with Tim in the evening. Hester had made that their excuse, but really neither of them wanted to go until the bootlegging was done away with. Their position in the town was too uncertain. These warm summer evenings nearly everyone went to the band concerts.

Tim hopped along between them, very proud of this rise to man's estate. When they came into the crowded center of the town, Stephen carried him.

"Good evening, Mr. Chase," said a precise, dignified voice.

Stephen acknowledged Mr. Evans' greeting.

"It's nice to see you out this evening," went on the banker. "Mrs. Chase, too. Good evening."

Mrs. Evans smiled graciously as they passed.

Open cars, closed cars, new and shining cars, cars battered and old, parked fender close to fender, encircled the open space around the band stand. The dusty, half-cared-for park of the daytime had vanished. In the middle of the square, a floodlight sent its strong light down on a platform draped in bunting, on the white uniforms, the brass instruments of the band. Hodges, standing in front of his men, had raised his baton. The light played along the dark rod and the eager, expressive fingers.

The Chases looked for a vacant space among the group sitting on the grass.

"Here's a place," said a voice.

"Oh, hello, Jones."

Ted and Tiny were sitting close together, sharing a newspaper spread on the ground. Ted scrambled to his feet. "Do sit down beside Tiny, Mrs. Chase."

Stephen put Tim in Hester's lap. The men stood, just behind.

"Look," whispered Ted to Stephen. "See old sobersides up there. Paul gets a whale of a lot of fun out of this."

"Where?" asked Stephen. "I didn't know he played. He's kept mighty quiet about it."

"See, over there playing the bass drum. And there's sour old Stretz with the piccolo. Seems as if they'd kind of got it twisted, doesn't it—doing each other's parts?"

Stephen laughed. "Guess you're right about that."

Ted, standing beside Stephen, felt a sense of relief. Either the boss didn't know he'd been in on that bootlegging, or he was going to pass it over. If he does know, thought Ted, he's being pretty damn swell about it.

Tiny had reached out her hand, taking Tim's. Half asleep, he let his hand lie, soft and relaxed, in hers. "I'd like one of my own," whispered Tiny to Hester. "Aren't they nice?"

The first number was a march, "The Thunderer." At its end, the hidden occupants of the cars spoke their approval. In half a dozen keys they let out blasts on their horns. Like clapping the applause rose and fell, then was taken up again. Only one horn, finally, persisted. Then it, too, died away, and there was expectant silence as Hodges raised his baton for the next number.

The band now did its most pretentious piece. Hester smiled, remembering Hodges' earnest insistence that they must learn something classic. It was long and a little labored, and the horns gave forth only scant approval. But now the band had this off its mind, it swung into the rest of the program with gusto, bringing the hour to a close with "America the Beautiful."

The people began singing the lines they knew:

"Oh, beautiful for spacious skies,
For amber waves of grain,"

breaking forth lustily with the chorus.

Hodges swung around, motioned them to stand. His own voice led them.

"Oh, beautiful for pilgrim feet
Whose stern, impassioned stress
A thoroughfare for freedom beat
Across the wilderness.

"Oh, beautiful for patriot dream
That sees beyond the years
Thine alabaster cities gleam
Undimmed by human tears.

"America! America!
God shed His grace on thee,
And crown thy good with brotherhood
From sea to shining sea!"

Hester reached out and took Stephen's hand, thinking of lonely places on the earth's surface where they had lived. Now they stood bulwarked by the vast stretches of America, touching elbows with their fellow countrymen, its townsmen, its farmers. They had made their first hurdle. They were no longer conspicuous in the town, no longer unwelcome. They weren't important, but they were at least taken for granted. This was their community.

41

AT THE Plant Stephen kept a steady eye on the men. They could settle down to work now. Nothing more was going to happen. But he'd have to wait until they realized this, before the Plant routine could again move smoothly.

"How are they coming on?" he asked Stackpole, as they walked through the sheds at noon hour.

"Okay, I think," said Stackpole. "It's a matter of time till they shake back into place."

From where they stood, they could look down on a knot of men eating lunch under the shed's overhang. As usual, Fred Stretz was the center of interest. His voice carried up to them.

"Once I was to a meetin' of Masons in Kansas City, and they had twenty-seven Commandery bands, seven hundred pieces. Conductor got up there where everybody could see him, and he was smart. He lined 'em up, twenty abreast, and put the basses right down through the middle from end to end. If he hadn't done it, the front rank would have been half a beat ahead of the rear rank all the time, because the line was so long the sound couldn't carry fast enough. As it was, the basses carried the beat from front to rear, and I tell you, that was music! When we went by the big hotels, folks said them big plate-glass windows would go br-z-z-t, br-zz-t . . . thought to God they was coming right out. There was a feller three miles away, and he says to me the next day, 'What kind of a God's-name band did you have over there last night?' I says, 'Did you hear us?' 'Hear you!' he says. 'You like to blowed me off a my front piazza!' Bands, nowadays, ain't no good. They got too many a them damn gobblesticks. Sound like the devil, a witch, an' a gale of wind."

"Saxophones!" said Pat. "Huh! Screechin' like as if they was a wake on."

Stephen grinned. "They sound pretty contented. I guess they'll settle into harness."

STEPHEN had time now to study his region, to do the constructive work of building up the business. He got into correspondence with firms that in any way used alcohol. He

made a number of trips to interest Middle Western business concerns in this local product. To his great satisfaction, he secured several new accounts, most of them small, but two of them pretty large.

He had leisure now to talk to the farmers who came into the office to get their checks after they had delivered their grain. He found them shrewd, full of horse sense, keenly aware of market conditions—steadily growing worse since the War, they told him. "We plowed up our pastures for wheat. Now we haven't got any foreign market." All of them asked him, "How much grain are you going to be able to take this winter?"

"I can't say," Stephen would answer. "It all depends on the market for alcohol."

One morning a young farmer whom Stephen hadn't met before came in.

"I'm Jack Peters," he said. "You've made out checks to me for grain, but I've been busy since I got back and I've sent my hired man in with the loads."

"Glad to know you, Mr. Peters," said Stephen. "You've been away?"

"I went up to the state college to take the short course in agriculture last winter. This spring, the farm work piled up on me."

They sat talking for a while. Then Peters asked the inevitable question, "How much of my grain can you take this fall?"

"Well, I don't know. Depends on my orders. Business now looks pretty good. But I can't begin to handle the surplus grain in this region."

"You know, I heard a darned interesting lecture last winter about a new market for corn—alcohol mixed with gas for engine fuel. Do you think the fellow was talking sense? Certainly would mean a lot to us farmers, the way the market is now."

"Oh, yes," said Stephen. "It's perfectly possible. They do

it in Europe, where they're short of petroleum. It means a special carburetor, though, so as long as we don't need power alcohol, we haven't developed it."

"This professor had the theory all worked out," said Peters. "Said it would conserve petroleum."

"It would," said Stephen. "Who was the professor?"

"His name's Smith. Dr. Jonas Smith. He only talked about it that once."

"Know where he is now?" Stephen, always on the alert for any material that in any way concerned his business, jotted down the name and address. He had never given up the idea that sometime he might be able to do something in this line at the Plant.

43

AT LAST the days held only a languorous warmth. The seasonal energy of the sun had spent itself. The Chases were returning from a two-day trip to a near-by small city, where Stephen had hoped he might get some more business. As they drove through the countryside, sometimes near, sometimes far off had come the sound of corn ears hitting against bang boards. In spite of the clear sunlight, the fields looked bleak and worn. Where the corn had not been cut, its blades were dry and old. A world spent, for the time, by its productivity.

They drove into the town. The soft maples bordering the streets were a clear lemon, through which the sun shone. The cottonwoods, dun-colored most of the day, now in the early afternoon were tall pyramids of pale amber. An occasional hard maple stood out in barbaric red. Leaves floated down in streaming colors to the brick sidewalks. All about them the death of the year transmuted into living color.

As Hester waited for Stephen to put away the car, she leaned against the trunk of the great cottonwood, feeling its rough bark against her back. Almost tangible was the

stillness of the Indian summer day hanging over the white house.

Stephen's voice reached her from far away. He had picked up the paper dropped in the recessed doorway and was reading the front page as he walked toward her. "The stock market broke," he said. "There's a panic in New York."

44

ALMOST as the Stock Exchange opened that morning, Jo Tuttle, always closely in touch with Wall Street, knew that the bottom had fallen out of the market. Brokers were calling on their customers for more margin. Jo left the receiver of one telephone down while he answered another. He was having difficulty in getting a connection through to his broker. Everybody was in panic, wanting to sell. Jo had a list of things he was planning to dump first—the speculative stuff he had been just playing with. He was aghast at the way values were melting away. He had thought he could drop this at any time and make a profit. But there were no longer any buyers.

The panic in the city and the panic in Jo's heart grew as the day grew. He, like a good many people, had thought that the easy prosperity was too good to be true, but he had continued to ride along on the market, stilling his doubts as to its underlying soundness. Instead of just his speculations crumbling, this was going to threaten his substantial investments, the future of the family, the carefully wrought Tuttle implement business.

Stock tickers repeatedly fell behind the market; in board rooms frightened customers milled about. Brokers' staffs, which in months past had worked overtime to record prosperous buying and selling, now labored all night to keep their records up with the progress of the crash.

Morning found Jo still in his office. All night he had

worked, checking up on his investments. He had figured out what strategy to follow. He believed it would save his business, but it meant cutting expenses to the bone. At last he fell asleep with his head on the desk.

Young Jo, coming in early, found him. For the first time he thought, with a start, that his father might sometime grow old. The firm flesh of his cheeks, always carefully shaved, had given no inkling of old Jo's greying beard. But this morning, the night's growth was unmistakably grey in contrast to his dark hair. With a little surprise, young Jo realized that his father had seen to it that his hair did not belie his look of vigorous middle age.

"Dad." Jo touched his father's shoulder. "The office force'll be in soon."

Tuttle woke with a start, got to his feet. "Thanks, son. Take down any messages while I'm out. I'll be gone an hour. Got to get myself some strong coffee and a shave. Don't worry," he said, aware of the concern on his son's face. "It's plenty bad, but we're not the fly-by-night people who get caught. We're the solid ones. It'll take more than this to wreck the Tuttle fortune." Stiffly he walked to the office door and went out.

Jo looked after him. "The old sport!" he said, admiringly.

45

THE full force of the depression did not at first hit Colfax. The near-by farmers had a good crop of corn and a fair market for it. In November, Stephen was able to show Jo a slight profit on the alcohol business. He held it, too, gained a little as the curve of business over the country went up, did well enough in the curve downward that followed. For some reason the cosmetics business increased with the depression. Orders from medicine firms held fairly steady.

The Chases' position in the town was becoming pleasant

and secure. The story of how Stephen had eliminated the bootlegging at the Plant had got out. It lost nothing by repetition. Butterfield published an editorial in his daily paper, congratulating Colfax on its new citizen, lauding up the civic-mindedness which had led Mr. Chase to do away with a town nuisance. He mentioned only the new sewage system, but everybody knew he meant the greater menace of bootlegging, too. Men like Hodges and Evans admired Stephen for his integrity, but what really cemented him into the town was that he had been smart—that he had outwitted men who thought they were outwitting him.

The families on the block became their neighbors. The children ran in and out with Tim, and their mothers came in to get them when they stayed past the dinner hour. Hester went to their houses to get Tim. She learned to borrow a cup of flour or an egg, and she liked her neighbors to do the same. The town, which had seemed meager and uninteresting when she had first come to it, took on the personality of the men and women whom she knew and liked.

Hester was finding herself equal now to the practical demands made upon her. There was a kind of happy unconcern between Stephen and herself in which Tim thrived. He was growing sturdy and independent. As she shaped her household to the needs of all three of them, it took on the atmosphere of contented people.

Inevitably, the depression began to spread over the country. Farm values took a big drop. There was a wave of foreclosures. In Colfax, Evans held off as long as he could. But Swift, who had been waiting for just such an opportunity to make himself a big landholder, did all he could to hasten foreclosures. In one week some dozen farmers had had their property put up at auction. A wave of indignation swept over the community. On the day of the last auction, when the farm of an old couple long known in the vicinity was to be sold, a group of angry farmers gathered, stopped the

auction, demanded that the old people be left their home. The situation had come very close to violence when Swift tried to bid over the ten cent limit the farmers had set.

Hester and Stephen had gone over to the Hodges' that evening. No one mentioned Siberia or China or the Flying Remnant tonight, that circuitous route of struggle which had brought them here. No one spoke of the American continent now as a refuge. They were shocked and sobered at what was happening.

"You can't blame the farmers," said Mrs. Hodges.

"Nonsense, my dear," said Hodges. "Whatever we may think of Swift, he had the law on his side. There's no justification for an act of anarchy."

"Something's wrong," she said sturdily, "when men can use the law to do such things. I know those farmers and they're good people."

"You can't condemn the anarchy entirely," said Stephen slowly, "if the law can be manipulated so that rich men can exploit the country's earning power."

They were silent for a moment. Like thousands of other citizens, they felt adrift.

"Anyway, we can rely on our bankers," said Hodges.

"Can we?" said Stephen. "How do we know? How can we tell?"

Silently the Chases walked home. The street lamps cast dark cones of shadow under the leafless catalpas. The stars stood out brilliantly against the clear sky. As they passed under a street lamp, Hester looked up at Stephen's face. It was set and anxious, but it no longer held the quality which had made him unknown to her on his return from China . . . that withdrawn quality which had shaken her sense of security in him. So slowly, so naturally had the change taken place, that, being with him constantly, she had not quite realized it. But now, with all the lines of his face brought out by the sharp glare of the arc light, she knew beyond a doubt that in the months they had been in Kansas, Stephen

had rebuilt himself. He seemed knit together, compact and strong, like his body. Whatever might come, there'd be that security. Did he feel security in her? Secretly she knew that she had come to possess a certain quiet strength which was his bulwark, whether he knew it or not.

46

VERA LICHENS had gone through the rehearsal as usual, pulling her musicians into that harmonious total which was making her famous as a conductor. The musicians, playing together under her baton through week after week of development, had been wrought into an instrument flexible and sensitive.

In the quiet that followed the rehearsal's end, Vera said, "I've something to tell you. Mr. Tuttle has been here to see me today, and because of the conditions in business, he feels he must give up this broadcast."

The studio was very still.

"I'd like your addresses," said Vera. "If anything comes up, I want to be able to reach you." She turned away.

A sigh swept over the room, a little shuffling, the motions of putting instruments into their cases.

47

YOUNG JO heard the news first from Mary. Neither Tom Breckinridge nor his father had told him the orchestra was to be given up. He understood why Tom hadn't, but his father's silence he couldn't understand, and it had put him, he felt, on a bad spot with Mary.

If I'd only known ahead of time that she was going to be out of a job, I'd have protected her. I'd have married her. I can't ask her now. Or can I?

"Now's the time for us to get married, my dear," he said suddenly. "You haven't any job and you can just take care of me."

"Oh, no, Jo. I want to. You know that. But I can't. Not now."

"And why?"

She patted his hand. "You know why."

"Yes, I know what you mean. But that's silly."

"If it were just you and I, Jo, I'd say so, too."

"In a time like this, it is just us, Mary."

"Jo, if we go off and get married now, your people would always believe I played on your sympathies. We'd never win them, then. Let's play the hand out, as we started it. If in the end we find it's no use, I'll marry you. I promise, Jo."

A light dawned on Jo. He realized why his father hadn't told him about the orchestra . . . he'd wanted Mary to know first. Dad knew I wouldn't put off marrying her, if she were out of a job. He counted on her integrity. He outsmarts me every time, thought Jo wearily. "What are you going to do?" he asked.

"Oh, the usual thing," said Mary, making it as off-hand as possible. "The music union. Vera. I stand well with Vera."

"Would Botti take you on again?"

"I'll try him."

"Of course, after playing in the orchestra it'll be a lot easier, won't it?"

"Oh, yes. It's playing under Vera I'll miss most."

Mary went the rounds. Botti was delighted to see her, but business was bad and he was cutting down on his musicians. At the music union, there was nothing. Vera was preparing for a tour as guest conductor of symphony orchestras in various cities.

"I'll try to get you a benefit or so, Mary. Maybe I'll hear of something else, later on. You can be sure I'll let you know, if I do."

"I know you will," said Mary. "Well, I'm off. 'By."

As the door closed behind her, Vera felt again that rage she had experienced on the day Tuttle had told her of his decision about the orchestra. She had argued with him, putting the responsibility squarely on his shoulders. "Mr. Tuttle, these are fine musicians. They're highly trained and they're sensitive men and women. Few of them, if any, will be able to find jobs. Can't we at least keep some of them—in a less ambitious program, perhaps?"

Jo had cleared his throat. "I'm sorry. I can't do it, Miss Lichens."

"Your wife is a patron of musicians," said Vera, shortly.

Don't get panicky, Mary told herself. Something'll turn up. Something always has. She thought of what so many people in the city were thinking of now—going home—and discarded the idea for the same reason many others did. The people at home were hard up, too. Of late, she'd even been sending them money.

Good that Jo didn't really understand how close her margin was.

At last she succeeded in subletting her apartment, took a room in the Village. To these old houses, musicians, painters, writers were filtering back, as jobs failed and pay cuts went through. It was like a home town, something familiar to which they could cling. The first day, Mary met Jerry on the street.

"Hello, there!" Jerry was glad to see her. "Living down here?"

"Yes," said Mary.

"So are we. Len's had a pay cut."

"Working?"

"Not for weeks," said Jerry. "Copywriters are a dime a dozen."

"So are musicians," said Mary.

"You out, too?"

"Mm-hm."

"Where are you living? . . . Oh, that's not far from us. We'll be around to see you."

Mary felt as if she had never liked Jerry so well. She seemed brittle and hard, shrewder than ever, but it was so comfortable to be with somebody who was in the same fix she was.

Jo, when he came to call, gave no sign that he thought she had been forced to take this small room. It had been part of a suite. Someone had put in a fireplace. The window opened on a dilapidated garden.

"Aren't I domestic?" Mary asked. She had on a small white apron. She had bought a little wood and had a fire going, had turned off the light. In the flickering glow of the wood fire, the room had a feeling of shelter. "I've grand news, Jo. I've got a job."

"Fine! What is it?"

"It's in a honky-tonk. I play the fiddle with an accordion and a guitar. You ought to hear the racket we make, Jo. There's a fat lady that sings, too. Want me to show you how, Jo?"

The note of almost choking relief in her voice gave her away to Jo. His first guess had been right. She was hard pressed.

Suddenly Jo was very angry. His father had used Mary's integrity for his own purposes. By gad, he wouldn't stand for it. He'd do something, at last.

48

IN THE Tuttle's duplex apartment, Mrs. Tuttle had a small sitting room built cunningly into a recess halfway up the stairs to the bedrooms. Its French windows opened on a balcony. In those long windows the city was framed.

It was early evening—the hour which young Jo so often spent with his mother—the time when he was most likely to

find her in. His father always stayed late at the office, a grievance Flora Tuttle had never got over. Jo acted as buffer, tiding his mother over from her busy day to her no less busy evening, taking the role of devoted admirer.

To his light and familiar knock she called, "Come." She stood with her back to the windows, behind her the lights of the city. The hairdresser had evidently just gone, for her hair was piled high on her head in studied symmetry. She had on a negligée of the soft purple which, Hester had once noticed, brought out the deep blue of her eyes. The rings on her hands and her necklace of pearls set off her clear fine flesh.

"You and the city rather sparkle, Mater," said Jo. "Going out?"

"To dinner," she answered. "A late one. Your father is still at the office?"

"About starting, I think. Beautiful," he said, "come and sit by me. I promise not to muss your hair." How many times he had made her happy for this hour, idling in her boudoir. As a little boy, he had come here. "Beautiful, I've something to ask you. And it's something only you can do for me."

Her face softened under the adroit flattery. "I've never refused you, have I, Jo?"

Jo bowed his tall head, dropped a kiss on her hair. "This is something special."

She tapped delicately with her fingertips on his knee, not looking up.

"I want to marry. Will you be generous, Mother, to me? The girl is—"

Mrs. Tuttle laid her fingers over Jo's lips. "Mothers see a great deal more than their sons think," she said. "This marriage . . . Jo, you won't do it unless you have no feeling for me."

"Mother—"

"If you don't speak it, it won't be here between us. Not

now, Jo. Not now, when your father has all these other burdens on his shoulders. I need you, Jo, as I've always needed him."

She got up. "I must go now and dress. Will you wait, Jo, dear, and see that my corsage is the way I like it? Please don't go until you have."

49

STEPHEN's orders dropped off with alarming rapidity. The question, Where can I sell alcohol? followed him even into his sleep. He woke with the answer. There isn't any market. But he must work up a market somehow. Or shut down. Back and forth over the problem his mind went, sorting out possibilities, discarding one after another as impractical, but never giving up. He mustn't show a deficit, or Jo would, of necessity, close the Plant.

The illuminated dial on his watch said one o'clock. He heard Hester's quiet breathing, and a little rustling sound from Tim as he turned over. If I run the Plant into the red, I'm finished.

He slipped out of bed, put on his bathrobe and slippers, went out into the living room, got his pipe. It was beginning to snow again. He could see the soft, wet flakes sticking to the window, and far away in the night somewhere, he heard a heavy grinding of gears. The snowplows were out. Business for the gas companies, he thought. If only the monster were running on alcohol!

But there wasn't anything for America in power alcohol. He'd gone over that proposition until it was threadbare. In Europe, where they used it, they used a different carburetor in their engines. Might as well wish for the moon, as to wish to put a new carburetor in every car in the country. The professors might theorize in their classes, but the thing wasn't practical.

Well, the only thing left to do to avoid red ink, was to put the Plant on part time, and hope to God the orders had reached the stabilization point.

Hester, deep in sleep, felt the absence of Stephen. Her body sensed that the slight slope toward his heavier weight was gone, and the warmth of his presence. Raising herself up, she saw through the door of the living room the faint glow of his pipe. She slipped into her dressing gown, in the darkness hunted for her slippers, joined him. "Stephen." She let her hand rest lightly on his shoulder for a moment. "Stephen, are you worried?"

"Mm-hm," he said.

Hester went on into the kitchen, out into the entry way where she kept the milk. It was very cold here. She drew her robe close around her, stooped and put towels along the threshold where the snow was sifting in.

Slowly the flaky, frozen top milk melted in the pan, blended with the chocolate.

"It does go to the spot," said Stephen gratefully. "Hester," he confided, "I've got to put the men on part time."

"Can their families manage?"

"They'll have to. My salary will have to be cut, too."

"We can manage," said Hester.

50

STEPHEN made a point of talking the matter of part time over with all his men personally. It was a hard, grinding job, but he felt it was due them, and he wanted to keep the *esprit de corps* he had built up. He was only partly successful. A cut in wages roused old suspicions. At heart the men saw employer and employee as enemies.

Stephen climbed the steps to Seaton's laboratory. "Paul," he said, "our orders are falling off. I've brought some sheets along to show you what's happened since October."

Seaton wondered why Chase was telling him this. Then, suddenly, he knew. He put down the small-necked bottle, cotton stuffed in the top, which he held in his hand.

He looks stricken, thought Stephen. He's never told me how he stands.

Paul was thinking of the growing number of people dependent upon him. He had got the mortgage on the farm paid, but now his brother-in-law was out of work, and he had his sister and her children to look out for. Recently they had joined his parents on the farm. And me on part time! thought Paul. He began to feel glad they didn't have a baby, now. He wished Muriel could see it that way.

"Tuttle's likely to close us down if we get in the red," said Stephen. "I hope we can break even by running on part time. I'm sorry, Paul."

"Okay." Seaton turned to his work. From across the laboratory table, he saw the back of Stephen's retreating figure, and felt a little comforted. If ever a back registered determination, he thought, that one does. He'll get us through somehow, even if it's only on part time.

And Stephen intended to, somehow. He plugged the small loopholes of expense, and worked for orders too small, seemingly, to be of much value. But he knew that at a time like this, they counted. Since his return to America, he had only partly adjusted his mind to prosperity. In the back of it lay an old knowledge of poverty. He had been very young when he had thought that bringing oil to the lamps of China would make China into a great and prosperous country like his own. Instead, the knowledge of how poverty functioned, learned in China, helped him now in keeping an American business going.

I'M SURE glad I got her a private room, if it's the last thing I do. Ted Jones hitched his coat collar up with a nervous

gesture, as he waited at the hospital for them to let him go up to Tiny's room. It may be the last thing I do for her, he thought in a panic. Then his mind went back to his part-time job. He'd had to pay for Tiny's room in advance. Every hospital expense, cash. No credit here. Never mind. He'd get through somehow. But his brain, fagged out with worry over Tiny, went on worrying about money.

Ten minutes past three. They'd said it ought to be over by three.

He rose to meet the nurse.

"You can come up now. You've got two fine little girls."

"I've got *what*?"

"Girls."

"Girl, you mean."

"No, girls. Twins." The nurse turned and walked quickly down the hall, her skirts rustling.

Ted plunged ahead of her into the room.

"Tiny?"

She lay so still it frightened him, her face in shadow. Her hands, picked out by the shaded light, looked thin and bloodless, accented by their red-tinted fingernails. Slowly she turned her head. "How'd we do it, Ted?"

"What'd you mean—twins?" he said helplessly. "I dunno."

Suddenly it seemed very funny to Tiny, and she began to laugh weakly. "I would. That's the way I would have a family. I'm always extravagant."

STEPHEN got them through the winter, the spring. Corn was constantly dropping in price . . . that was what helped him to get through.

"But it destroys the farmer *and* your market," Hodges told him. "Don't forget that."

"You're not telling me anything I don't know," Stephen answered soberly.

53

SUMMER again, and the corn stood heavy in the fields. The plumes at the tops of the sturdy stalks waved in the wind. Bladelike leaves curled, succulent and rustling. The fine silk of the tasseling corn turned from a pale lemon yellow to brown.

Stephen was running the Plant two weeks out of the month, but he went over each morning to look after his mail. This morning, he found on his desk two letters—one from a big drug company, the other from Jo. He picked up the former. The smallest order that company had placed in ten years. He knew pretty well what would be in Jo's letter.

"If you can see any way to stay out of the red, keep running. If you can't find a new market, you'll have to close down. The old one is about gone. Nobody knows what's going to happen. Even the banks look shaky. The country's gone to hell, Steve. You've done a good job, but we can't any of us buck this depression."

The disaster had run full circle. The city could not afford to buy the products of which Stephen's alcohol was an ingredient. Stephen could not buy the farmer's grain. The farmers could not buy Tuttle's farm implements, and Tuttle could not afford to carry an alcohol business that was running into red ink.

Well, I've got to buck the depression, said Stephen grimly to himself. Jo can talk. He's got enough to carry on. I suppose he can't even realize how close to the wind people like me are sailing. I've got to sell alcohol.

The door into the Plant opened. Stackpole stuck his head into the office.

"You here?" Stephen spoke in surprise.

"Had a few little repairs I wanted to make. Thought this was a good time. Like to have you take a look at a couple of things I can do at no extra cost."

Stephen followed the bent old man, who stopped to jerk his thumb at the great Corliss. "Waste, ain't it, standing idle? Machines go to pieces just the way men do."

Stephen did not answer. Their steps echoed in the silent building.

"Couple of boards rotted out here," said Stackpole. "That door needs rehangin'. I got the stuff around to do it."

"Go ahead, by all means," said Stephen, saying in his mind as he spoke, I've got to sell alcohol.

Mechanically he made his duty inspection of the Plant, climbing at last to the head house. He remembered his first day here, the metallic beat of grain in the hoppers. This place was silent now. One small sparrow beating its wings against the window. Stephen opened the window, let it fly out.

He remembered the pride he had felt in his country's civilization when he had first looked over these fertile plains, which the use of machinery had so quickly made productive. But of what value was plenty, unless people could use it? His mind went back to the old idea which had so long interested him . . . the use of industrial alcohol mixed with gas to run cars. Why did he always say to himself that it was impossible?

Stephen stood in the bare room with the three wooden knees sticking out of the floor, thinking. It had been the genius of America to invent new uses for its vast production. Automobiles had only used kerosene in a new form.

Who would have thought, twenty years ago, that we could have cracked kerosene and taken gas out of it?

Why don't I find out what kind of experimenting is being done with power alcohol? That college professor Peters mentioned, who was lecturing around in the Middle West—Jonas Smith, he remembered the man's name was.

Back in the office, he searched through the file for the address. I'm going to write him. He sat down at his desk.

"I have understood that you are experimenting with power alcohol. . . . The question is, is there a feasible market?"

As he signed the letter, Stephen had a moment of dark panic. A hope less than forlorn, the only hope for himself and his men. Well, he'd hold Tuttle off, anyway, until he heard.

54

TEN days later, when Stephen came into the office one morning, Blanche Wilson sat at her desk looking like an affronted hen. Before her stood a sturdy young man with short, thick legs, strong, straight back, a bedroll lying beside him on the floor.

Looks like a transient worker, thought Stephen. Evidently bedeviling Miss Wilson. "What are you doing here?" he asked bluntly.

"I've told him there's no work," snapped Blanche. "But he's bound to see you."

The young man turned to Stephen. "My name's Jonas Smith." Across his round face, streaked with dust and perspiration, passed the most ingenuous smile Stephen thought he had ever seen. "I got your letter and figured the best way to get at this business was to come on and talk with you."

"Well," said Stephen, a little aghast, "I hadn't counted on your answering my questions in person. But come over to my desk and sit down."

"I've been interested for a long while back," said Smith, sitting down promptly in the chair Blanche reluctantly

brought for him. "Corn alcohol's got a big undeveloped market. America uses twenty billion gallons of gasoline a year. One per cent of grain alcohol blended in would use up seventy-odd million bushels of corn, or seventy-five million bushels of wheat, or two hundred million bushels of potatoes, or—"

Stephen's heart sank. "Look here," he said. "I've been over all that. With me, it's a question of an immediate market. You can't change the carburetors on every car in the country in the middle of a depression."

Smith held up a nudgy hand. "I'm coming to that," he said. "I got the idea from my father. The old man was a die-hard. Wouldn't use machinery on the farm. Used horses till the day he died. We argued about it all the time I was growing up. He said if you had horses, you could feed them the corn you grew and their dung put back into the field replaced what you took out. So I worked out an engine that would burn corncobs—made the machine eat corn like a horse, so to speak. But Pop said where was your fertilizer—no flap, like from cows and horses—and he wouldn't have any part of it."

Stephen saw out of the corner of his eye Miss Wilson's outraged face. "So?" he asked.

"So I figured the old man was right. The idea was, not to mine the land. That's how I came to experiment with corn alcohol." Smith seemed to sit more firmly in his chair, his strong thighs flat against the chair seat, his feet flat on the floor. "This is the way it works. We've got more grain than we can sell. Make it into alcohol, burn the alcohol in your machines. What's left of the corn after you get the alcohol out—the protein—make into feed for stock. Their flap's the fertilizer. See? It's all there."

"If you can sell the alcohol," said Stephen wearily. "There's still the little matter I mentioned of the standard carburetors."

Smith dug in an inside pocket for a little notebook. "Here's

a tested formula," he said. "It's an alcohol-gas blend that'll burn in any carburetor."

Stephen looked at the neat figures. Percentage of alcohol, percentage of gasoline, speed of the car—everything worked out meticulously. He held down his excitement. "You've tested this thoroughly?"

"Don't take my word for it. We can try it out in your car, or any car."

"Let's talk this over at lunch," said Stephen rising. "I've got a number of questions."

As they walked into the hotel dining room, Smith ceased abruptly to talk. Stephen, looking at him, saw that he was pale.

"Guess I need a cup of coffee. I hitchhiked from my state. It's quite some distance."

Watching him as he ate, Stephen realized that this was no hunger of a man merely having a late lunch. He sensed that there was more to this story than he had learned.

Smith mopped up the last bit of stew with a piece of bread. "Thanks," he said, with a little sigh of satisfaction. "I may as well tell you that I'm out of a job."

"You're not teaching now?"

"No. They let me out this spring. It was over this alcohol business. They said it was because I bootlegged the alcohol. I did," he added, grinning. "Had to have it for the tests." He sobered suddenly. "I don't think that was their reason."

"What was their reason?"

"It was queer. First, when I lectured at other agricultural colleges on the theory of farm products used in industry, my school liked it. They said it brought them good publicity. But when I actually had a formula and showed that I could make cars run on power alcohol, and began mentioning it in my lectures, they tried to shut me up. And when I wouldn't shut up, someone started that tale about my bootlegging. I don't know . . . something back of it."

Perhaps this man was just a crackpot, after all, thought Stephen. If so, he was wasting his time. But there was something convincing about Smith. Aloud, Stephen said, "I'd like to try this thing out in a series of tests under different conditions."

"Sure. That'll be fine."

Thinking of what Smith had told him, Stephen realized that the man had no way of keeping himself going for the time it would probably take to make the tests. He felt pretty sure Smith wouldn't accept money. "How about coming home with me tonight?" he suggested. "I'll 'phone my wife."

"I'd like you to see him, Hester," he said, from the hotel telephone booth. "Maybe you can help me to decide whether to trust his judgment."

"He's our one hope, isn't he?" said Hester. "We've got to take chances." She turned from the telephone to make the arrangements for their guest. Strange, in all this time, they had never used the room up under the eaves, which they had planned as a guest room.

Before Hester, Smith was as silent as he had been voluble with Stephen. Not a single unusual or striking detail about him, thought Hester. A type seemingly to be found by the dozen on any American street. Could it be that behind that stolid face was the unique mind which could lead them out? She grew apprehensive. Was Stephen on the wrong track?

THE blend made from Jonas Smith's formula stood up in test after test. The trials fell during a week when the men were working, and that in itself heartened their spirits. To be handling alcohol again, to hear orders shouted along the cooker deck, to be cleaning and tending the big throbbing engines—just to have sweat on his body again, toned a man up. Then all this excitement and mystery that centered

around the office . . . this new guy, Smith, going around looking important, must have something up his sleeve. The atmosphere of discouragement that for many months had hung over the Plant began to lift. Word got around that New York was going into a new enterprise that would boom the Plant.

Never had Stephen stood so high with his men as in these days, the result partly of the loyalty of Seaton and Stackpole and Bebbidge, the result, too, of a certain stability most of them had come to feel in him. They needed to believe in him now—he, the one anchor in a world submerged in unemployment.

"I been one to feel he was a low-down cuss to put us on part time," said a cooker runner, at the noon hour, squatting on his haunches by the shed wall. "I guess I had to be sour at someone. But he's no slouch. Ain't he the one that's got this new business goin'?"

"I heard him talkin' to that fat professor feller, and he was sayin' he'd like to put this up to the big boss in New York. Says, 'You got a good thing there and I ain't afraid to tell him so.' Says, 'I'll tell him we can make a hell of a lot of money on this-here product you got,'" said one of the grain handlers.

"The hell you heard Chase talk like that! He keeps his mouth shut, Chase does. He ain't spillin' any such talk." Fred Stretz clapped on the top of his dinner pail, adding, "Gossipy, high-talkin' old woman, you are!"

"Have it your own way," the man said, grinning. "Somebody must a heard him say it. Might of been me. How'd anyone make up a thing like that?"

Fred, almost cheerful, went along to the office. "Hello, Blanche. God Almighty and his helper gone to lunch?"

"Look here, Fred Stretz, you can't talk that way in this office!" Blanche straightened her plump shoulders, drew down the corners of her mouth. "Mr. Chase is a gentleman, and you've no call to insult him."

"Couldn't have called him no better name, could I? Come on, sister, don't try to be high and mighty with me. What's up?"

"Don't you 'sister' me! What I know in this office is private."

"Something pretty good on the boards," Fred went on. He guessed he'd better try another line with her. "Maybe Chase's going to turn out to be a pretty good guy."

"I'll say if this goes through, Fred Stretz, you'll have no need to be such a grouch. You'll be forced to look up to Mr. Chase."

"You mean we'll get decent pay and decent hours?"

"I'll say!" Blanche, in her secret elation over what was going on in the office, forgot to be cautious.

"Must have some new-fangled process on. I'll bet Mr. Chase has got some brand new product!"

"He has," said Blanche triumphantly. "Hear that car coming up to the Plant?"

"Sure." Fred listened, turning his head toward the open window. "That's the boss's car. Oh, come off, Blanche. You can't sidetrack me. I want to know what chance we got for regular work."

"I'm not sidetracking you. I'm not telling you anything, either. But ain't it running nice?" She could not give up the opportunity to impress Fred.

"Course. It's a good car."

"Well, it's running on alcohol. *Our* alcohol."

"*Our* alcohol!"

"There now. I didn't mean to tell you, but I guess no harm done. It's as good as settled that we've got a big new market for alcohol."

Fred gave a low whistle. "I guess I better be gettin' along, Blanche." I'll be blowed! he said to himself as he went out. That'd be somethin'! Motor fuel!

Seaton and Jones tested some of Smith's formulas in the laboratory and made him up more blend, using the alcohol

distilled at the Plant. Secretly Ted tried some out in his own car, sneaking it out of the laboratory. "You know," he said to Seaton, "it made my old jalopy run like a Rolls Royce. Say, old boy, if they go in for this, we'll not only be back on the old schedule. We'll get a raise!"

"Well, keep your knowledge to yourself," said Seaton, a little alarmed at the way the news was getting out. "Somebody else might steal the thing and do the Plant out of it."

"I'm too smart to let anything out, my dear Paul," said Ted in a mincing tone, circling the table where Seaton was at work. "But, oh, boy, I guess you've been right about Chase . . . he's going to take us places." He laughed. "I met Tom Thumb as I came in and he's about to bust his little coat open. I take it he's in on the know. Hear that professor and the boss are going to New York tonight."

"Where'd you hear that?" asked Paul, looking up.

"Oh, I get around."

"Then he must be pretty sure of it." There was relief in Seaton's eyes. Maybe if things picked up, he could get work for his sister's husband here at the Plant. It would be help coming just in the nick of time.

56

WHEN Stephen stopped at the bank to cash a check for his trip, he knew that word of his undertaking had arrived before him. At the teller's window stood two farmers whom he knew, men who in the past had sold him their grain. He hadn't been buying from them of late, and they hadn't been any too cordial when he had seen them. But today they were. As he took his place just behind them, one of them turned.

"Hear you'll be in the market for corn, come fall. Hope you'll keep me and my brother here in mind."

Before Stephen could reply, Butterfield, who had been

standing by one of the high desks writing a check, beckoned to him. Stephen went over.

"What's all this I hear about your pumping new life into the community? God knows we need it, but why be so mysterious?"

"Sorry," said Stephen. "Don't mean to be. The truth is, there isn't anything to tell, yet."

"You don't know your America, Steve. We want our Eldorado. Florida's busted up, stock market's out. For God's sake, old boy, let the town have the kick of glorifying you and your new scheme."

"But I don't know I've got anything yet," Stephen answered him with the caution of the true business man. "I won't, until I get back. I'm going to New York tonight."

"Good as that?" Butterfield's voice carried his admiration.

Evans saw Stephen at the teller's window, asked him to come into his office. "If we can help you at any time, we hope you'll come to us, Chase. The bank wants to get behind any industry it can."

I guess my stock in the town is coming up, thought Stephen, as he went out. Believe I could float a loan right now on the stories going around.

57

HESTER stood at the gate listening for the last throb of Stephen's departing car. It had taken him until midnight to get everything in order. The street was very quiet and empty, the houses across the way dark. No cars going by—only the sound of Stephen's, as he turned the corner. He was on the Kansas City road now, with its steep grade. She heard the car go into second. There, he had reached the top of the grade, slid over. No further sound.

Hester turned back toward the house, feeling very tired now that the excitement and hurry of getting the men off

was over. How still the house was! Odd, now she thought of it, she had never spent a night in it without Stephen. Why hadn't she taken Tim and gone with him? They'd have been together then, whatever happened. They couldn't afford it, that was why. She felt a deep longing once more to be encircled by New York's airy night structure of lights, to see Vera and Mary Trencher. Neither of them had written her for a very long time. She had a sudden realization that the old life was slipping from her grasp. The rigid economic structure of Stephen's life and hers was cutting her off completely from it.

Her mind followed Stephen out on the road. She could see him sitting behind the wheel, driving with precision, Smith beside him. Jo . . . her mind leaped to Jo. Would he back Stephen?

This wouldn't do. She mustn't exhaust herself with longing or crippling apprehension. She got up, carried Tim over to her bed, lay down beside him. Tim no longer had any baby curves. He was hard and knobbly. His elbow stuck into her. But the feel of his angular, boyish body renewed her will to fight.

58

ALONG the straight concrete roads, like aisles between the high-standing corn, Stephen raced the car across Kansas and Missouri, going east. Barns, once red, washed by rain, had not been repainted this year. The pure white of farmhouses was turning a dirty grey. The paint business must be badly hit, too, thought Stephen.

In the cornfields, the tassels, staying on through summer heat and rain after their function was performed, were a weatherbeaten tan. The saberlike leaves were faded, the stalks, grown woody, looked polished and shiny. The ears of corn, thrust out from the crotch of leaf and stalk, were a shining

orange where the husks had parted. Corn bred to such exuberant vitality that it pushed its long, well-filled ears beyond the protecting sheath.

Across Indiana and Ohio, across fertile section after fertile section, through the abundance of a great land, in which men could no longer afford to buy medicine.

As they crossed the Hackensack marshes, Smith said, "That New York?" He looked at the tall buildings, shining and magnificent against the sky. He did not speak again while Stephen drove through the congested traffic. "A man living here would forget he owed a thing to the earth," he said at last. And then, as they left the garage, "I don't know. Maybe we shouldn't have come."

"Come along," said Stephen. "You'll get over feeling swamped. I want to get to Tuttle's office before he closes up for the day."

59

JO LOOKED tired, Stephen thought. He had grown heavier, and there were dark pouches under his eyes. But his voice had the familiar hospitable ring as he greeted Stephen.

"I got your wire, Steve. Awfully glad you came up, so we can talk over this matter of the Plant."

"I came," Stephen answered, "because I've got a scheme, Jo, which, if it looks good to you, will keep the Plant going."

"Shoot," said Jo. "But it'll have to be pretty good, Steve. Business has stopped taking chances."

When Stephen finished, Jo said nothing at first. He got up, walked about the office, lighted a cigarette, crushed it out, lighted another. "When you start on a thing, you don't do it by halves, do you, Steve?" he said at last. "Your plan's pretty ambitious for these times, but it seems sound. Of course, I'd want to try out the blend for myself, and then—"

"I've brought Dr. Smith along with me," Stephen inter-

rupted him in his eagerness, "for I knew you'd want to test the thing out for yourself."

Jo finished his interrupted sentence. "After that, Steve, I'd like to talk it over with some of my friends who're in the oil business. They have men studying every phase of motor fuel. I can't help but wonder, if the product is really usable, why they aren't doing something with it. They must know what's been worked out in that line. This Smith you speak of couldn't be talking around in colleges without their knowing it. I'm not meaning to discourage you, Steve, but I'm a business man in the midst of a depression, and I've got to be careful."

"Smith would be glad, I know, to explain to any of the oil men what he's done. I don't expect you to go into it, Jo, until you're sure of it."

"Let me think about it." Jo rose. "It's grand to see you, Steve. Where you staying? Why not come to the apartment? I'm alone most of the time this summer. I can't be so far away as the farm with things the way they are. Jo's with his mother most of the time. She's pretty lonesome, now that Jane's married."

Stephen had an instant's thought of Celly, and then of the brilliant marriage Jane had made—one big fortune marrying another.

"I'd like to, Jo, but I've got Smith with me, you know, and I feel I ought to stick around with him."

"Oh, bring him along. Like to talk to him, and we might try his stuff out tonight. You know how I like to tinker. But if he spoils my new car, I'll have the hide off him."

Stephen had never been able to refuse Jo's insistent hospitality, could not now, although he feared it might not be the best way for Jo to meet Smith. Jonas, made unsure of himself already by the city's magnificence, might be put off by the richness of the Tuttle establishment.

"We're retrenching a little," said Jo, as his chauffeur stopped the car in front of the apartment house.

"What does he do when he doesn't retrench?" asked Smith of Stephen, when they were alone. "You know, I don't belong here. I've got only the clothes I'm standing up in, not even a clean shirt. I meant to bring one, and then I got to figuring on a formula and forgot it." He came through the bathroom that separated their two rooms, stood in the doorway. He had taken off his coat. His red suspenders had run a little, staining his blue striped shirt.

"Same here," said Stephen, "except for the shirt. I've got some extra ones. Can I help you out?"

"No, thanks, wouldn't fit," said Smith. "Got a whisk broom? Like to brush my pants and coat. We'll be going out right after supper to make the test, won't we?"

"Imagine so," said Stephen.

"As I was saying, you're just the man we farmers have all been after," said Smith to Tuttle.

"I know," said Jo. "You think I took away your corn market when I crowded out the old horse."

"That's not what I mean. What I meant is, we can feed your business if—"

"No shop until after dinner." Jo slapped Smith on the shoulder to reassure him. He liked this chap.

"All right," said Smith, and subsided into silence. But there was a special kind of dignity in Smith's silence.

The door that led into the hall opened just then, and young Jo, immaculate in white flannels, sauntered toward them. "Hello, there, Steve. Dad told me you were in this afternoon. Where's Hester?"

"In Kansas," said Stephen. "This is only a flying trip, you know."

"How are things going?"

"Oh, the way it is with most things, these days. How are things with you?"

"So-so," said young Jo. But there was no light in his face as he spoke.

"Jo, this is my friend Dr. Smith," Stephen went on. Jo acknowledged the introduction with a friendly nod.

Smith had given a good demonstration of his blend, and Jo, who knew when there was the slightest flaw in a machine's performance was impressed . . . Stephen could see that. But he wouldn't talk about it.

"Give me time to think it over," was all he would say.

Stephen knew he mustn't press him. Jo wasn't the kind to be forced into anything, and, too, Stephen was a guest in his friend's house. He must bide his time.

"I'm tired," said Jonas bluntly. "I guess I'll go to bed."

Stephen and Jo sat talking for a long time.

"I've been through hell," said Jo, "trying to pick up the pieces of this crash. Business is in awful shape. Never known anything like it in farm implements. We've closed out a number of branches. The ones abroad all had to go."

"What happened to Purcell's boy?" asked Stephen.

"Had to bring him home," said Jo. "We managed to give him something in the office to tide him over. Well, America's America. Soon's we get over the depression, we'll be all right again. Good, rich land, like my grandfather made his money on—the land'll always be here for us."

"China thought that, too."

"What's that got to do with it?"

"I mean we're gutting the land. Using it up. The lower prices go for the farmer, the more he's going to take it out of the land."

"You're a cheerful cuss," said Jo, yawning. "I guess we better be getting to bed. Jo isn't in yet," he fretted. "I thought he'd got over his puppy-love for that girl, but evidently he hasn't."

Puppy-love? wondered Stephen. Young Jo was twenty-four. Aloud he said, "Why do you want him to? Mary's pretty fine stuff."

"Flora doesn't like it, naturally."

Stephen felt a certain undefined uneasiness as he silently followed Jo through the luxurious hall and up the stairs. Was Flora at last breaking through that tough common sense that had held Jo to simplicity?

"Good night," said Jo, at Stephen's bedroom door. "I'll try to give you an answer on the blend by noon tomorrow, Steve."

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"I HAVEN'T got very good news for you, Steve," said Jo, the next afternoon, as Stephen entered his office. "Just a minute . . . I want Jo in on this. He's always been interested in the Plant ever since he was out there."

Odd, thought Stephen, to call him into the discussion at this late date. Almost as if old Jo wanted a witness.

When young Jo came in, his father went on: "This morning I talked with some of my friends in the oil game. They say that every once in a while some crackpot theorist pops up with this idea—talks about our petroleum giving out, springs power alcohol. They know all about this man Smith, apparently. They do, of course, use some sort of alcohol blend in Europe, but that's because they haven't got enough petroleum. It doesn't work so well as straight gas."

"Didn't you think your car ran all right on it, Jo?"

"Well, cheaper cars might not."

"I've tried all kinds. I wouldn't have put the proposition up to you, Jo, if I hadn't given it every conceivable test."

"Even then their main contention stands—that we don't need such a blend, Steve."

"Suppose that's true. Suppose we don't need to conserve our petroleum. If they created a market for the farmers' corn, it would help put the country on its feet again—help to give themselves a market for their gas. It's short-sighted on their part, Jo. Prosperous farmers will buy more gas than poor

ones—as you said yesterday. Besides, look, they’ve got oil enough for fourteen years, they say. What’s fourteen years in the life of the country?”

“Time enough to worry about that when we get to it. It’s no good arguing. The experts have put thumbs down on the idea, Steve.”

“But, Jo, you’re up against the problem of a market for your farm machines. You told me last night that your business is falling off. Why? Your machines are just as good as they ever were, and the farmers need them just as much as ever. Why don’t they buy? Just one reason—they can’t afford to. If you buy their corn to make alcohol, in return they buy your tractors. You’ve got the Plant. Why let it stand idle?”

“The small amount of farm machinery the farmers in your neighborhood would buy wouldn’t help me much. Our Plant’s too small even to scratch the surface of the corn belt, and a number of new plants wouldn’t be practical. Nothing less than a revival of business over the whole country would help me. I’m playing safe, Steve. That’s what all business is doing. Draw in, keep my business sound.” Jo looked at him a little impatiently.

“I grant you we couldn’t tackle it all at once, but the scheme’s good,” Stephen persisted. “It’s the kind of thing Americans have always done. When one thing has failed, we’ve always found a new way.”

Jo began fingering the papers on his desk. Stephen knew what that meant. Busy men did it when they’d lost interest in what a man was saying and wanted to get rid of him. But Stephen was desperate. Nothing ahead for him . . . a man of forty-five, out of work in a time of depression. “It would take care of me and the men in our neighborhood, if you’d go in for a small business in power alcohol on your own . . . market the stuff retail in small quantities. I’ve got the training for just this sort of job. I learned from the peanut vendors in China that you can make money from three-peanut sales, Jo.”

"From what? You're crazy as a coot, Steve."

Stephen hurried on. "I built up a two-million-dollar business in kerosene in just one Chinese province, out of sales so small I used to call them that. I learned to know the state of mind of a nation that is really poor. We aren't down to that, but money's tight. If we could build up a business on small sales in China, why can't we here? Even if the farmers take only a little of our blend at first, we can begin buying corn. If we handle it right, the thing will snowball. I'm up against it, Jo. I need this job," he ended simply.

The appeal in Stephen's voice reached young Jo, spectator as he had been at so many scenes like this of men and women crowded to the wall. Here in this office and in Mary's little room he had heard them talking with this urgency in their voices. This power that his family wielded . . .

"Steve," old Jo said, "I'll be frank with you. I'd like to help you out, but I'm tied up. This depression's too big. My main business—the business my family's made their name in—is the farm implement business. That's what the Tuttle name stands for. If I go into a sideline that the best men in the field say won't work right now, the bankers won't think I'm a good risk. They'll begin to question my judgment. I can't afford to be in such a position with the banks, Steve."

Young Jo's gorge rose. The old man had taken worse risks in the past. He had one of his sudden bold ideas, the kind his father called impractical. Had he known it, they were the kind of sudden leaps of fancy which had made his grandfather rich. He'd probably get in worse than ever with his father for springing it. "Dad," he said, "why don't you lease the Plant to Steve? Let him try the scheme on his own? Your Plant's going to stand empty, as it is. The property'll go to pieces. Better have it used."

Old Jo glanced at his son with annoyance. Then he leaned back in his chair, twirled his eyeglasses, as was his habit when considering deeply. Studying Stephen, evaluating the possibility of his success on his own, Jo noticed again the strong set

to his mouth, realized as he had that first day Steve had come in to see him after his return from China, that he possessed more than ordinary determination. This was the type of man to take risks in time of depression—level-headed, seasoned. And he'd had training by one of the most efficient of the big corporations and in a country bone-poor. A man doing a small business in a kind of co-operative scheme, taking his men in on it with him, had a chance. They'd be able to compete with big private enterprise because they'd be using their own labor and materials.

"Well, I guess Jo's idea's not bad," he said at last. "If you and your men want to take over the Plant, I'll draw you up a contract with just a dollar as consideration each year . . . lease the Plant to you, say, for five years, with the right to buy it any time during that period, if you can see your way to. We'll let it be known that I've sold the Plant. If I kick in with the equipment, do you think the men and you can swing the working capital yourselves? It's cutting it pretty close." He held up his hand, stopping Stephen who was about to speak. "You want to think, Steve, whether you can afford to take such a risk, use your savings that way. If you've got enough to live on for a few years without a job, I'd say don't do it. Anywhere along the line, have you made enough to retire on, Steve?"

"No. I haven't." Stephen answered a little shortly. What a man was worth was his own affair. But his mind was working quickly and accurately analyzing Jo's proposal.

"You can't, of course, expect to get the same salary that you're getting now," Jo went on hastily, "nor the same wages for the men, but you might make enough to live on. If the time ever comes when you get back to the present scale of wages, and there's a profit, then I'd expect to take my share in the ratio of my investment."

Stephen gripped his friend by the hand. "You're all wool and a yard wide, Jo. If I can get the men to go in with me and we can raise the money for operating expenses, I'll take

you up. It'll be a tough job, but," he added stubbornly, "I know it's a good business proposition."

Young Jo walked to the elevator with Stephen. "Good luck, Steve," he said. "I hope it goes."

"It'll mean a lot to a good many people if it does," said Stephen, "and," he added, "they'll have you to thank for it."

"In that case," said Jo with a flash of his old lightness, "I'll have to go celebrate . . . the first idea I've ever had that hasn't been strangled at birth."

Stephen looked at him more closely. That remark explained a good deal to him about young Jo.

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As STEPHEN walked through the city to the garage where he had left his car, he passed long lines of idle men standing outside soup kitchens and employment agencies. In their faces discouragement, humiliation, despair—signs of poverty he had once known so well in China.

"Time of depression," Jo had said, as if it were just natural that there should be depression. Why, Jo spoke of periods of depression with that same resignation the Chinese used, when they said, "It's the time of plague."

Stephen knew the insidious loss of vitality that came to a nation as soon as it began to go hungry—the relentless sequence of idleness, want, dishonesty, violence. He straightened his shoulders. He didn't propose to accept that sequence, not here in America. He wasn't licked yet. Nor were men like Stackpole. Nor was Colfax, the sturdy Mid-West region to which he now felt with pride he belonged.

He wasn't fooling himself. It was a risk, as Jo had said. For one thing, he didn't know just what stuff his men were made of . . . how they would stand up to risk and responsibility, nor what kind of teamwork they'd do. Stackpole and Seaton would carry their end of the load, he felt sure. But

how about Jones and Bebbidge? Stretz? Some of the men weren't even honest, given a chance to be otherwise. After all, that bootlegging business had pretty ugly implications. Wasn't the material too flawed to shape into anything so idealistic as this? And the money—how much would the men be willing, even able, to put up? Did they *have* any savings? How much would fall upon him to raise? His investments—the stocks and bonds bought on tips from the friends of Middleton who were so sure they were in on the know—had stopped paying dividends. What he had, he'd have to sell at a terrific loss to get cash.

The whole town of Colfax, unless he was mistaken, would react unfavorably to the scheme, when he returned bringing this kind of precarious business, instead of the new capital, the new prosperity, they were dreaming of. If only the scheme hadn't got out, but—he shrugged—impossible to have prevented that. And there was the fact, not to be discounted, that vested interests had already discarded power alcohol as impractical.

Caution said give up the undertaking, but that was no solution. He had to face the fact that he was forty-five. What he had saved wouldn't last a half-dozen years. And then what? He'd be over fifty. Absolutely no chance for a man of fifty. And Tim would still be only a little boy.

"Suppose we push right through," Stephen proposed to Smith, the last night of the drive home. "Save our hotel bills."

They took turns driving and resting, sleeping as best they could with their heads propped against the side of the car, and, when they were awake, talking, threshing out every possible angle of the business.

Colfax was just sitting down to breakfast when they passed the white tower of the Plant. Their predicament seemed unreal to Stephen, as he looked at the neat lawns with the long shadows of tree trunks, heard the faint clatter of dishes and voices, smelled bacon frying. The Middle West took pride in

its corn-fed pork. Sweet and tender, the bacon cut by the local butcher, lean or fat as you wished it. Its smell was connected in Stephen's mind with these good years of his return to confidence in himself.

"Let me out at the drugstore for breakfast," said Smith.

Stephen was grateful. He wanted to be alone with Hester before he faced the men at the Plant, wanted to talk things over with her before he acted.

As he went up the walk, he heard no sound. Hester and Tim must still be asleep, everything was so quiet. But as he went around to the back, through the screen door he saw them. Tim, clad in his beloved overalls, was sitting by the window, dangling his feet and drinking milk with large contentment, stopping now and then to draw a deep breath. There was a line of milk on his upper lip. Hester was standing by the sink washing dishes, her shoulders and head bent to the task. For a moment Stephen stood looking in at these two he so loved.

Then Tim saw him. "Daddy!" Tim's chair toppled over with a clatter, as he charged the door. Hester made a quick and eager movement toward him. He was smothered by their arms about his neck, their kisses.

"What did Jo think?" Hester pressed him with questions. "Was he interested? Did he like Jonas Smith? Did he think we could do it?"

"Let me have breakfast first," Stephen begged.

Silently, swiftly, she set about getting him something to eat. He's putting off telling me, she thought, as she took the crisp, thin bacon, the eggs, from the frying pan. She laid her hand lightly for a moment over his hand, as she placed the plate before him.

The warm, good food, the coffee, sent a current of new energy through Stephen. "Hester, Jo doesn't feel he's in a position to go into the thing himself, but—"

"What's his reason?" she interrupted. "You've proved it's good. Why won't he, Stephen?"

"Because the oil men he consulted say it isn't practical." Tersely Stephen told her all that had happened between him and Jo, and Jo's proposal for a new set-up.

Hester stared at him, as the full import of such an undertaking struck her with terrifying force. Oppose the advice of the oil men . . .

Stephen wished he knew what she was thinking. He went on. "I won't go into it unless you're willing, and willing with your eyes open. I don't want to keep anything back. We'll have to jeopardize all our savings, putting part of them in now as our share, if we take up with Jo's offer. It may even mean putting up my life insurance as collateral, if things should go against us. But I believe we have a chance to succeed, and if we do—" Stephen stopped. He would not urge her.

Hester's gaze settled upon Tim, who had lost interest in this grown-up talk. He was standing by the table, building a precarious structure out of spoons. This new venture would expose to risk everything she had regarded as their ultimate security. If that were swallowed up . . . She had the woman's instinct to hold on to what they had. It would carry them for a few years. Then times would be better. Jo might open up the Plant again. "Of course, Stephen, you know that I trust your judgment. But you must give me a little time to think."

"I didn't mean to hurry you . . . only . . . it's a crisis, and I've got to act quickly. When I go to the Plant, I'll have to make a definite statement."

"Just till you're ready to go to the Plant," Hester said. "You must rest a little after driving all night."

Stephen lay down on the couch, fell almost at once into a heavy sleep.

Hester went into the garden where she could be alone and could think. She walked down the path where she and Tim had discovered the crocuses that first day. In the two years they had been here, the shrubs had grown tall. The garden was neglected. Neither she nor Stephen had had time to give

it much care. But as often before, it gave her the sense of sanctuary. Surrounded by its peace, she had faced many a difficulty.

She had to own to herself that she was afraid of Stephen's scheme. The fear that had shadowed her for most of her married life had come to her again. Big business—the power that had closed them in for so many years in China. America was its stronghold. No matter how small and insignificant Stephen's independent business might be, it could not be hidden. Jo Tuttle would not risk opposing that power. How could Stephen consider doing it, with all his experience? She felt anger against Stephen, that he would voluntarily do such a rash thing. The anxiety that they had felt over the possible closing of the Plant was nothing to the anxiety they would have once they went into competition with established interests. With every penny they had saved put into the business, all security would be gone. What was Stephen thinking of? He mustn't be allowed to do it. She must make him see the danger.

Hester came back around the house, stopping by the cottonwood, laying her hand for a moment on its stalwart trunk, then leaning against it. The strength seemed to go out of her as she thought of how Stephen would look when she showed him the impracticability of his scheme. She could hear him say, "I suppose you're right. It's a big chance to take," in a tone from which hope had gone. Then what? They would live in a kind of penurious safety, in which Stephen's security would be gone. He would always feel he might have succeeded. He would always feel that she had drawn him back. Suddenly she knew that it was material safety she was trying to keep for herself at the sacrifice of Stephen, just as she had when she had come back from China without him. Nor would she have security, if Stephen lost his. "I will not be afraid," she said to herself. She ran her fingers down the runnels in the cottonwood's bark, turned and went in.

Stephen woke to see her standing beside him.

"I've decided. It's the only thing to do, as I see it," Hester said.

"You think I can make a go of it, then?"

"Yes. I'm ready to risk it, dear." She met his gaze with steadiness.

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STEPHEN decided to go to see Evans first. The bank's support he must have.

The old banker was annoyingly superior when Stephen told him what he proposed to do. Stephen could not help but feel that the dapper little old man, sitting behind the handsome mahogany desk, was enjoying the chance to lecture him on taking risks.

Finally, in exasperation, Stephen asked, "What would you have me do? Close the Plant? Throw more unemployed men on the town?"

"I'm not suggesting what to do. That, of course, is for you to decide. It's a great risk."

"You took much greater risks a few years ago." Why, Evans had shown more interest when all that cock-and-bull story had been going around, just before he'd gone to New York.

"But then there was prosperity." The thin, tepid voice held a note of finality.

"There'll never be prosperity again, if everybody takes that stand. Well, Mr. Evans, I won't take any more of your time."

"Just a moment, Mr. Chase. I want you to realize what you are getting into. As for the bank, we have reason to believe that you are a pretty sound man. We don't want to lose you here, and we don't want to lose industry. Understand, we can't go in too deeply right now. See what you can raise from your men, and then come back to us."

ONE by one the men arrived at Stephen's office, about them all an air of excitement and importance. Just as they had expected and had told their wives and friends over the town—new business on.

The early September day, although warm, held in it an atmosphere of preparation for winter. The pungent odor of pickling floated about little and big houses. The streets were quieter than they had been for many weeks. The children were back in school.

The men, dressed in their business suits, were less sure of themselves in the presence of Stephen than they were in their work-clothes. Seaton had been the first to arrive, Jones next, dressed up for the occasion.

"Aw, take that fancy coat off, Ted." Bebbidge assayed to do it for him.

Stackpole had on a thin, black alpaca coat, double-breasted, the stripe of his shirt faintly showing through.

"Peek-a-boo stuff." Stretz made the remark with sardonic humor to Blanche, seated at her desk. "Kind of shirtwaist thing you girls used to wear when I met Eva." He liked to twit Blanche about her age. It always set her going.

When Blanche was mad she said smart things, but not now—not with Mr. Chase present. She had a position to maintain today.

Fred, this morning, was as near happiness as he ever got. On the strength of the talk around the Plant and this call to meet Chase at his office, he'd stopped in on his way over to see about a new radio to take the place of his old one. The music store hadn't been very cordial of late, when he'd gone in to hear it, but they had today. He'd put it right up to them that he'd be in the market for one soon. Money talked.

Stephen had been glancing over the mail accumulated on his desk during his absence, hearing the good-humored talk

around him, dreading to tell his men the truth. If they weren't expecting so much, he thought. If only we could have kept the thing quiet. It would be harder to get the new scheme across, after all that highfalutin talk about New York money making another Florida boom here in Kansas.

They had all arrived now—Seaton and Bebbidge and Jones, Stretz, Pat, Stackpole, and Blanche Wilson to keep a record of the meeting.

"I've got you together," Stephen began, "to tell you about what took me to New York. I guess I don't need to explain that. You know all about it." He spoke a trifle sardonically. "Tuttle believes the blend is a good product. But he doesn't see his way to go into building up a new market just now. Frankly, this is the situation. Our old market for alcohol is gone. The Plant will be closed unless—"

"Christ! Tuttle, with all his money!" Words jerked out of Stretz.

A low murmur of anger against Tuttle arose, each man's personal catastrophe made more unbearable by the dreams of money he had built for himself out of Chase's New York trip.

Ted Jones lighted a cigarette, tossed the burnt match down on Stephen's desk, intending to carry off his disappointment with nonchalance. But suddenly the idea of going home to Tiny and his babies, without a job, struck him, and he nervously crushed out the cigarette. "Should have charged Tuttle for all that overtime we put in testing. Quite a nice little bonus, eh, Paul?"

"Wait!" said Stephen, breaking into the bedlam of voices. "Let me finish."

The men, brought to attention by the note of command in his voice, became silent.

"Tuttle hasn't let you down as you think. He has made a sporting proposition to us. There are personal and business reasons why he can't go into the thing himself. But—" For the second time that morning, he stated Tuttle's offer.

Even Stackpole sat unmoved.

"If Tuttle's afraid of it, why saddle us with it?" Jones voiced the suspicion of the group.

"You're perfectly right," said Stephen. "Tuttle's not willing to take the risk. He's got an established business that will give him enough money to live on. But I haven't and you haven't. I see no reason why we shouldn't succeed, in a small way. It's an exchange of products between us and the farmers, and we both need to sell."

"Simple as that," said Stretz scornfully.

"Simple as that, which isn't simple at all," snapped Stephen. "I'm not trying to make you think it's going to be easy, or even safe. The fact that corn is cheap is about the only thing we have in our favor. We'll have to work like hell."

"Yeah," said Fred. "And what's our guarantee that you and Tuttle aren't in on this to get a lot out of us for nothing?"

Stackpole bristled. "Look here, Stretz," he said. "That'll be all, out of you. The boss has put up a proposition. We can take it or leave it. You don't need to get ugly about it."

Fred half-rose from his chair, his fists clenched.

"Your guarantee is the same as mine, Stretz." Stephen felt his own anger rising, but he spoke quietly. "The books will be open for us all to see. We share what profits we make in proportion to our investment—including Tuttle who's supplying the Plant and Smith who's supplying the formula. You have to understand, though, that nobody gets a nickel over wages until we meet our whole payroll and the farmers are paid for their grain."

Bebbidge, who had not spoken before, heaved his big shoulders out of his chair. "You said something about sharing according to our investment. What investment?"

"We'll have to raise among ourselves the money to start on."

"There's an awful stink of New York about this," said Fred. "Who'd give a plant for nothing, like you say?"

"It's up to you men," Stephen continued. "I'm prepared to go in with you and risk my money along with yours. On the other hand, I'm ready to give you all a month's pay, if

you don't want to go into it. Just one thing I think I should say, though. In every city I've driven through, I've seen long lines of men looking for jobs. It won't be easy for any of us to find work."

"You can't scare me with any such talk." Stretz spoke as he got to his feet. Standing there more out of plumb than ever, his shoulders hunched over, his belly protruding, he looked around at the other men with contempt. White-livered . . . no minds of their own. All the hatred latent in him—his futile hatred of Burton, his brooding sense of injustice over his part-time job, the inequality between what Chase had and what he had, his resentment against Stackpole—focused on Stephen.

"This is what I say to you, Chase, settin' there stinkin' of New York. Only a fool would trust you. Haven't you beat us down ever since you come here? What have we had from you except cuts and short hours and a rotten little New York stool pigeon to watch us as if we was a lot of thieves? Now you come soft-talkin' around—" he pointed his finger at Stephen—"tryin' to cheat us out of our savin's. Tryin' to make sniveling cowards of us, sayin' there ain't no jobs for us in the country. Never's the time I ain't had a job. Come out, I say, you damn crook, and show your hand. Tell the men how much you're planning to park away while you're fleecin' 'em!"

Stephen had remained silent. The men, even Stackpole, sat dumb, too astonished to object, until Bebbidge spoke. "You're a damn liar, Fred. It's not Chase who's the crook. He's always been white all the way through with us, and nobody knows it any better than you. I've a mind to tell the truth on you, Fred."

"Oh, shut up!" said Fred. "The Plant's busted up. What do I care what you tell?"

"Boys, what about it? How about our getting behind Chase?" Seaton turned toward Jones and Stackpole, speaking in his ordinary tone of voice.

"Sure." "Sure!" came from one after the other of them. "We don't stand for what Fred's saying."

Suddenly, from doubt and chagrin, they felt themselves swinging into enthusiasm. The very risk began to buoy them up, a little bit of the gambler in them all.

Blanche Wilson rose, looking over the men with scornful superiority. "You haven't done anything very practical to support Mr. Chase. As I understand it, we've got to raise money to run the Plant. I'd like to make a *practical* suggestion. I'm willing to put my savings into the new firm. If it's a thing Mr. Chase says will go, then it will go." She turned directly to Stephen. "If three thousand dollars will not seem too small a sum," she said with mock humility, "I'd like to invest it in the new company, Mr. Chase." Blanche sat down, enjoying to the full the astonishment she had created, enjoying especially Fred's glare of rage. For years she had wanted to get back on Fred.

"Atta girl!" Ted Jones voiced his approval of Blanche, looking at her with mingled admiration and envy. Imagine, he said to himself, her saving all that dough! Good sport to put it up. But she's got an awful sour puss, just the same.

Stephen did not know, looking at them, which was worse—Stretz's tirade against him or this sudden swing of the others from suspicion to unquestioned support, swung over by loyalty, the only practical help coming from Blanche Wilson. Not a very stable foundation for a business, he thought, but I'm in, now.

"We certainly want you in the business," he said to Blanche. "I suggest we don't take the time of the men who don't wish to go in on it. Will you make out a check for what's owing Stretz, Miss Wilson?"

As Blanche handed Fred his check, he said, "You ought a be beat up." With anger and violence he looked her over.

"You ought to be ashamed, Fred."

"And I'd like to do it," he added. Without speaking again or looking at anyone, he went out.

"I take it," said Stephen, as the door closed behind him, "that the rest of you are interested."

They nodded.

Carefully Stephen explained what lay before them. "It comes down to this," he ended. "If I put in fifteen thousand, can you and the other men, with Miss Wilson, raise the rest?"

Nobody spoke at first. Bebbidge was figuring on a piece of paper. "I want to be in," he said, "but I'll have to do a little figuring first."

Stephen looked about the room. Jones wouldn't have anything laid by, that was sure. But Paul—he'd counted on Paul. Seaton's head was lowered. He was making crosses on the top of a match box. Stephen waited. He didn't want to put in any more. "Suppose we adjourn, and each of you see the men in your departments. Then we can have a general meeting and we'll know just where we stand."

Paul lingered after the others had gone. "Chase, I know you naturally expect something from me, but I'm strapped. My sister's family—" He stopped. "I feel I'm letting you down," he added, after a painful pause.

"You've never let me down," said Stephen. "I understand, Paul."

They walked out to Stephen's car.

"Hop in," said Stephen. "I'll give you a lift home. But look, Paul. To be in on the management, each man must have something in the business. It's done this way, sometimes. A man who can't invest gives part of his salary each month. Could you manage that?"

"It'd be cutting things pretty close. I'll have to think about it."

Seaton stood watching the car go down the street out of sight. Somehow I'll have to raise something for my share. Suppose I had to go in and tell Muriel I was out of a job? About as hard, though, to tell her we'll have less money than we have now to live on.

Quietly he let himself in with his latchkey. Muriel might

be resting. She hadn't felt well lately. Opening the door to their small parlor, he saw her lying on the couch, her eyes closed. He was about to tiptoe out of the room, when in a soft voice, not opening her eyes, she spoke. "That you, Paul? I thought I'd rest a while."

"You do, honey. I'll get lunch."

"Everything all right at the Plant?" she asked. "Mr. Chase didn't call you because anything's wrong, did he?"

"He's going to try a little different set-up, that's all," Paul answered her gently.

He brought her her lunch on a tray, made her drink the tea he had made, then moistened a towel and laid it over her eyes, before he went back to the kitchen to tidy up.

There's only one way. We'll have to mortgage the farm again. I'll have to write Mother. She'll say it's eating our fences. Maybe it is. But we've got to eat something. After all, I've the right to decide. It was my money that paid the mortgage.

The news spread quickly over the town. Fred Stretz started it, bragging to his cronies about his own smartness in leaving such a fly-by-night outfit.

"I'll know in a few days whether we can manage to raise our part," Stephen told Hester. "We're out our chief distiller. That's a blow. But maybe I can work Smith in there. He certainly knows the process."

At the thought that the scheme might fall through, Hester felt so great a sense of relief that she realized she really was hoping it would.

Stephen couldn't do any more now. Whether the business organism he had sought to bring to life had strength enough to live, he didn't know. The men were game. But how game? Or perhaps, how desperate? Only today when he had told them that Tuttle would close the Plant had he realized how close was the margin on which they lived. Around them,

closing in on them, was the depression that now embraced their country. They were touched on all sides by fear.

64

MRS. STACKPOLE had been shuffling about in the rooms back of the shop. "The white mice don't like it here, nor do the canaries," she murmured to herself. "It's no Christian country, with the sun blazin' away in September like the heat off a furnace. I wish we was all back in the Bronx."

Hearing the bell in the front shop jingle, she turned. It was Stackpole returning from the meeting. He hung his black alpaca coat on a nail in the kitchen, came into their sitting room. "Mrs. Stackpole," he said, getting into his overalls, "I've an important matter to talk over with you." He snapped the straps into place over his shoulders. "I've got a chance at last to go into business for myself with a man I can trust."

Stackpole wanted desperately to own a share in the business, but he knew his wife was no novice in the handling of money. She'd saved what she'd made and most of his wages, too, lent it out to her neighbors in the Bronx—short terms, high interest. He'd left it all to her. How she would take this sudden determination of his to do the investing himself and on a large scale, he could not guess. He watched her settle down into her rocking chair, her old knotted hands resting on its arms. Her shaggy brows were drawn together in a way she had when she was working out a deal.

"I want the details, Stackpole," she said. "You're no more than a child with money."

When he had finished, she said, "It's too grand a scheme for the likes of us." She raised the dark window shade a few inches, looked out into the hot, blinding light on the asphalt of the pavement. Ireland was very green.

"Nonsense," Stackpole told her.

They had a good argument, lasting through the day. Which

of them enjoyed it more, it would have been hard to say. Through their lives these arguments had been bread and wine to them.

Finally they went to bed, Stackpole exhausted but triumphant. He dropped off to sleep, his wiry, rheumatic frame nestled close to Mrs. Stackpole's warm flesh. In drowsy contentment, he slept.

She lay whispering to herself. It had been her dream to go back sometime and be proudly American in Ireland—come into conflict now with Stackpole's dream. Stackpole buying in on Kansas! Ah, I have the age upon me! But he must have his work, she whispered, or he will die.

65

STEPHEN's breath was taken away by Stackpole's substantial contribution. Seaton, too, had raised a decent sum. All Ted's and Tiny's wild schemes, debated when Ted had come home from the first meeting, had fallen through, but a certain slow maturity growing in Ted made him take the smallest possible salary in order that he might assume his share of the responsibility with the other men, instead of accepting a better salary from them as their employee. Most of the men wanted to have a part, like Ted, and either took low wages or scraped up a few hundred to put into the business.

When Stephen totaled the large sums and the little sums, he took his figures around to Evans. On his return to the Plant, he was able to say to his men, "We've raised enough so that the bank is interested."

Ted had gone home after the meeting, not unaware of the dramatic effect of his news. It was always fun to strut a little before Tiny.

"You mean," said Tiny, her eyes popping, "you're really going into business for yourself? Why, grand, Ted! Now,

look. Take the girls, while I talk." She thrust a baby into each of his arms, took the cigarette that dangled from his lip.

"Aw, Tiny, I won't get ashes on 'em. Gimme my butt."

The alert Tiny paid no attention as he stood helplessly. "Look, Ted, it's our chance. No more working for a measly little pay check every month. People that have their own business get rich on it."

"Now, wait. Don't be in such a hurry. It's a measly little pay check, all right. But it's different, somehow, too. It means I'm owner, but I got responsibilities. You'll have to do a lot of economizing right now, my dear Tiny!" Ted hitched one baby up a little to emphasize what he had to say. "Powder and lipstick, out!" He jiggled the other twin to emphasize that. "Movies, out! Gallivanting, out!"

"D'you mean it, Ted?"

"Sure, I mean it. I'm not kidding you. We've got to meet our bills, down at the Plant." All at once Ted had a heretofore unexperienced sense of power. "Whew! I guess I'm one of the big guys and didn't know it. Here, take these kids."

Over the twins' heads, Tiny looked at him shrewdly.

Sitting in on that momentous meeting at the Plant had been Jonas Smith, whose dream at last was to become a reality, Why he had gone cold and hungry for this idea of his, Jonas Smith could not say. Why he had not been content to follow the pattern of other college professors, building himself into a position of safety and respect, he did not know. Within his crude and simple person was a dream which he could tell only inarticulately, in a series of ratios, of corn into alcohol, alcohol into energy, energy back into corn.

STEPHEN had never known how much, in the eyes of the men, he had been the master, they his servants, until they

were on equal footing. Now he knew they had all feared and resented him, although they had spent their active resentment upon Stackpole. The new set-up proved an awkward and difficult relationship at first. Most of the men were uncertain how to treat Stephen and Stackpole. They tried to bully Stackpole, found they couldn't. Stephen they either treated with a familiarity they did not show even to one another, or they watched him with suspicion of any attempt on his part to gain power.

At first it seemed impossible to maintain any discipline. The men mistook liberty for license. But after a few mishaps, they began to realize that as partners in the business, they were the losers from any waste. Efficiency was more essential than independence. They must trust men like Chase, Smith, and Stackpole to run the business. They could fight for their ideas in the meetings, but once a thing was decided, they must take orders without question.

During this period of organization, Stephen often did not know how to act either. Carefully he felt his way. Sometimes he thought Stackpole too officious. Sometimes he thought Smith was. Slowly he came to realize that the autocratic power he had had over the men before, he must now relinquish.

Then there came a day when for the first time one of the men called him "Steve," quite naturally, not realizing what he had said. They were coming out of one of the general meetings. The discussion had been pretty heated, but they had reached an agreement at last. One of the cooker runners was walking with Stephen, still arguing, still not quite convinced over the issue under discussion.

"You see, it's this way, Steve," he said.

Steve? thought Stephen. And then he had a warm feeling of comradeship with these men which he had never had before. They had accepted him as one of them. To Blanche Wilson, too, he was in a new relationship. Her money was in the concern, and she didn't propose to sit on the sidelines. She

talked a great deal these days. She had a curious, disconcerting way of bringing Stretz into the conversations.

How much, Stephen wondered, was she telling that brother-in-law of hers about the details of the business? Had she lost her belief that the code of her profession was, as she put it, to keep her mouth shut?

One day Blanche announced, "The Stretzes are moving away. You know, I kind of think Fred'd like to take back all he said and come in on this deal."

Had Stretz put her up to it, Stephen wondered? She'd hardly expect that, with Smith in Stretz's place now as chief distiller. Stephen said nothing.

Fred had indeed sometimes doubted his stand. Something had happened to Eva since that morning when he had banged in through the screen door, telling her he was through at the Plant. She'd been hanging up dish towels when he came in—quiet and happy. At his words, she had dropped into the first chair she'd come to, fumbling at her apron, her eyes looking helpless.

"You might as well begin to pack," he'd told her, roughly, trying to cover up his fright at the fright he saw in her face. "We'll have to move to a place where my kind of work brings what it's worth."

He was scared at what he had done, sensing vaguely that he had destroyed in Eva something which had made possible his defiance. He went around town, aimlessly. No longer did he have the prestige of being chief distiller at the Plant. Some of his old cronies didn't even believe that he'd really walked out of his own accord.

But today, starting out for a new place, suddenly Fred felt well pleased with himself. He tipped his hat to the back of his head with bravado. The baggage rail he had put on top of the car was piled high with their luggage. "Quit crying," he said to Eva, sitting at his side. "You don't want the town to think we're down and out."

"I'm thinking of the bungalow, Fred." Eva drew the

youngest Stretz's feet up out of the way of the gearshift. The five others in the back seat kept up a clatter. They'd escaped school, at least for a while.

Blanche Wilson felt lonely and a little let down when they had gone. She had no audience any longer.

It was not only Blanche who felt a drop in enthusiasm. While they had been organizing, the men had been carried along by the feeling that they were doing something. But now that that was done and the orders left over from the old business had been filled and they had no new business, they began to get panicky.

67

THE stems of all Stephen's pipes were bitten and chewed, as from week to week, as sparingly as possible, he paid out the necessary funds. Except in the office, where they worked on plans, the Plant stood empty and silent. Lights were out on the control board. No whir of machinery, no fires leaping up under the boilers; cooker tanks empty, the manholes in their roofs open; no alcohol rising through the spargers in the stills. That new market they had dreamed of had not yet materialized.

They were finding out for themselves, too, that a prophet has no honor in his own community. It was of no avail to tell the townspeople that *they*, men of their own town, men they knew to be just like themselves—no more brains, no more anything—had a solution for the revival of business. That power alcohol could ever be a basic industry, the townspeople doubted. If so, why hadn't the big fellows in New York taken it up?

Men guyed them or were indifferent. A few individuals began buying the blend. Dr. Hodges made a practice of using it, and pointed out to the people he called on, especially in the country, how well it worked. Butterfield carried a large ad for them in the local paper at cost, but he didn't bother

to drive around to the Plant to get the blend put in his car. Easier to stop at the gas station uptown.

"But, after all," Stephen pointed out, "it's the farmers we're after. They are our real market. We want to get some of them to buy in on the business."

The farmers, too often fleeced by townspeople getting them to invest in frauds, responded slowly. They were suspicious of mutual benefits. At first, none of the Plant men seemed quite fitted to meet their shrewd arguments. Seaton was too scientific for them. Bebbidge knew machinery, not soil and crops. Smith should have been the one, brought up as he had been on a farm, but he talked too confidently of what power alcohol could do.

"I dunno," said the farmers. "Sounds a good deal like the way they talked about the market during the War—said two-dollar corn had come to stay. Didn't we mortgage our farms to buy more land? Plowed all night so as to plant more wheat, more corn, more everything."

Then Smith's anger would rise. "Yes, and you had no business to plow up good grassland."

"It wasn't us," some would answer sullenly. "The big guys in store clothes told us to do it."

"But why did you listen to them?"

"Ain't you asking us to listen to you now?"

Some thought it funny to bait Smith. It became a game among them to "git that fat feller goin'."

It was Ted Jones who turned out to be a good salesman. He would hang a cigarette on his lower lip, pull up his trouser leg so as to be comfortable with one foot on the fence rail . . . "We all want to make money. We're all in the same kettle of fish. You've probably got kids. So've I. Twins."

"You don't tell?"

"Girls, at that."

"Nothing wrong with girls, is there?" the farmer would say encouragingly.

"Not much help to a man." (Ted was secretly very proud

of them.) "Now, look here, if I'm willing to take a gamble on this business, you ought to be. If it goes, we might all make money out of it. And you know, I bet it goes."

"Ought to, with a feller like you in it," they would say, disarmed. "What you got to offer? As I see it, it's something like this: You promise to take my corn. I figure I'll have around a thousand bushels. But I've got to pay part of the price into the pool, and I don't get all my money at once. That right?"

"That's right," said Jones cheerfully. "The more gas you buy from us, the more you get your neighbors to buy, the more money you get in the end."

The farmers, suspicious, but interested, began bringing in a little grain. But they complained because they had to come in every time they wanted gas for their cars or farm machines. After long discussion, the Plant decided to buy a tank truck, take the blend direct to the consumers. Jones insisted on it. He was to drive it—be salesman and truck driver in one. He it was who painted to the farmers' wives the bright picture of getting into town.

"Just like trading in your butter and eggs to get something you want. We take your corn, you take our gas. The gas gets you into town, anyway."

Two winters of not much getting into town had made the farm women desperate, ready to try anything. They began to urge their menfolk to go in on the plan.

STEPHEN began working on a wider market. There was a line of independent filling stations in the state. If he could sell them on the idea, they might handle the blend. "That's the end of the business I know best," he said. But it was difficult to interest them. He could not let them sell the blend below the retail price of gas, or he would be sure to start re-

taliation from the oil companies. His one great talking point remained—If the farmer sells his corn, he can buy more gas, more everything.

By Christmas time, the idea had begun, slowly, to take hold. Stephen, remembering the maps the merger had used, put up a big map of eastern Kansas on the office wall. Little red flags marked the farms, the stations, to which they were selling the blend. And he posted the amounts. As the column and the flags grew, the men's enthusiasm began to grow. They pulled together, keen for every economy, taking out as little as possible for personal expenses.

It was to their wives that fell, day after day, the strict, grinding minutiae of economy. Tiny went into tantrums over it, declared she'd leave Ted Jones, and then, with brilliant finesse, stretched the meager income, still giving dash and color to their drab living. Muriel Seaton, faced always with the shadowy, dependent group of her husband's relatives, with growing tension doled out the inadequate funds from day to day, and with growing resentment, which made her at times overdo the necessity of economy. Sometimes she went without her own lunch, making of herself a martyr, presenting to Paul in the evening a face of resignation. She had not Tiny's relief of explosion. Such explosion would have seemed like catastrophe to her. And then, Tiny had her two babies. Muriel's need for one haunted her night and day. Sometimes she dreamed of the soft, warm feeling of a baby's skin, woke crying. Sometimes the pillow on the bed looked like a baby wrapped in a blanket.

Hester had a double problem. She had a part to play which none of the other wives had. She it was who expressed their success to the town. She did not realize it in the beginning, too worried to think about the town. It was Swift, the real-estate agent, who made her remember it. Stephen had asked her to see Swift about the house rent. "See if you can't get him to give us the house a little cheaper," he had said. "We've got to cut our expenses more than we have."

"I THOUGHT maybe you'd be coming in soon to see about another year's lease," Swift greeted her cordially. "I want to congratulate you, first, on this business venture of your husband's." Swift had had shrewd training in finding the vulnerable spots of his clients. Pride was one, fear another. First, make this woman feel her husband was a big man, then drive home the fear. "Let me be a real friend and advise you," he went on. "If people think you have money, they'll have confidence in you. If they think you haven't, you might as well close up shop right now. I know town ways and town people. This is the time you and your husband ought to buy and build." He watched closely to see if Hester displayed any uneasiness. He'd like to find out, himself, if they had any money behind them.

Hester looked into his cold, inquisitive eyes, realized what he was after. She knew his kind. She must give him the impression that they had money, or he'd raise the rent. And he'd get a peculiar satisfaction out of giving momentum to gossip. No woman Hester had ever known had done the shameful things with gossip that she had seen some men do. They organized gossip, planned coldly the details of another man's destruction. Grapevine telegraphs, whispering campaigns, they called it. What was Swift's motive she did not know, but she knew she feared him.

"You're perfectly right, Mr. Swift," she said coolly. "My husband and I have been discussing plans for a permanent home, now that our business is in Colfax. But Mr. Chase accuses me of being very particular. And I really do want more time to study designs and styles of architecture, and, of course, the location."

"You have a special style in mind?" asked Swift, suave now and very gracious.

"Yes. Later on, I want to come to you for advice. Just

now, with that in view, I'd like to take our present house by the month. And," she added, "since the house is not altogether satisfactory, and the owner, as you know, has done nothing to repair it this year, we shall, of course, expect a lower rent."

"Well," said Swift, taken aback. "I'll see what I can do for you. About building—"

"I'll want to discuss that later," said Hester rising.

The interview roused in Hester an old distrust—her fear of small communities. Before Mrs. Evans and her group of friends, she saw to it that she was always light-hearted. Even before the Hodges, she came to feel she must never seem discouraged.

Mrs. Hodges, quietly watching, knew that the going was pretty hard for the Chases, knew, too, that as with her husband, she must assume that everything was well with them. Proud and sensitive people could endure greatly if no one broke through that reserve—their nonchalance, their laughter, their quiet assumption that life was as gracious as its exteriors.

Hester found one friend, these days, with whom she could be herself. She and Tim went often to see Mrs. Stackpole. Both of them liked the sitting room behind the shop, little and cluttered as it was. The windows had turkey red curtains, and there was a red and white checked cloth on the table. The teakettle seemed always at the boil. Then there was the little snapping sound of seeds being cracked by the canaries. Stackpole's tools lay on the windowsill. The cat and her kittens had a basket behind the stove. Timothy thought it a beautiful room. Hester thought it a good room.

There was a kind of ageless maternal quality about Mrs. Stackpole that made her mother all life that touched hers. She would shake the snow or the rain from Hester's coat, straighten the collar of her dress or feel her hands to see if they were cold. In doing so, somehow, she eased the strain in Hester's life.

WINTER was long and cold, with little snow. The earth in Hester's garden was hard with frost, the tiny particles like flakes of hard soot blowing up against the windows.

One early winter dusk, she stood looking out of the window as the Plant tank truck drove up. Ted Jones jumped off, came up the walk, beating his arms against his shoulders in a kind of backward hug.

Hester opened the door. "Come in, do. You look half-frozen."

"No kidding, I am." He stood over the hot-air register, his cheap plaid mackinaw held out to catch the heat. "I've been driving since early this morning. Steve home yet?"

"No, but I expect him any minute," said Hester.

"I oughtn't to wait. Ought to get home. Tiny doesn't like it if I'm late. But I want to see Steve. I thought he'd be home by now."

"Look, go and get your family, and we'll all have supper together. Then you can talk to Stephen." Hester thought, Each of us fighting it out alone. Why should we, any more than the men?

Ted looked a little doubtful. "Do you think we dare bring the girls out in this cold?"

"Oh, bundle them up," said Hester. "Tim will love it."

Ted caught the spirit of it. "Tiny's crazy to see your house. She likes pretty things," he said, a little shyly for him.

They came in, Ted first, proudly bearing his offspring, Tiny following, too diminutive, Hester thought, ever to have brought forth these lusty babies. She had on a coat of last year's cut, but when she flung it off, Hester saw that her dress was up-to-date in every detail.

"It's just awful getting along," she confided to Hester, as they put supper on the table. "I make my own dresses, and I've dyed Mary and Martha's rompers, but look at them."

Hester did. Fat and stolid, the twins sat on the floor, as Timothy circled solemnly. No necessity for a front here.

"I know," said Hester. "The first time I tried to make Tim's overalls, you should have seen the mess. But the men are getting ahead, aren't they? We ought to be on our feet soon."

From the other room she heard Stephen say, "I can understand it, Ted. You really think it's growing?"

"Yep. Seems to me it is," answered Ted. "You know, I'm a pretty good salesman, but I can't buck the arguments they're beginning to bring up now against the blend. It's just as if they had help to make 'em think the blend isn't as good as straight gas."

For a time, sitting close together around the supper table, the men forgot their difficulties and the women their niggling economies. Tim sat at Hester's side, the twins on the sofa comfortably buttressed with pillows.

But soon Ted went back to his problem. "You know, Steve, this gossip about the blend worries me. Things grow over the telephone in the country. One lady gets a call, all the rest listen in. It's all they got to entertain 'em. If one has anything to say about me and the tank wagon, they all hear it."

"Alcohol!" said Tiny. "You know, Mr. Chase, I believe he'd put me on that tank wagon if he thought it would help to sell alcohol. Why, he don't talk anything else but alcohol. He even smells of it." She stopped aghast, remembering Ted's little flutter with the bootleggers.

"Now, see here, Tiny, you let me talk," said Ted.

Stephen smiled at Mrs. Jones. "I don't think the situation is as serious as all that, Ted," he said. "Seems to be quite a lot of interest among the farmers, actually. Jack Peters was in this afternoon. He's got quite a scheme. He wanted to know if some of us from the Plant would come out to their next Grange meeting and explain to them how the farmers can buy in. I understand they're having a Grange festival." He

turned toward Hester. "And, by the way, he wanted to know if you'd play for them."

"Why, I'd love to," said Hester. Her eyes had widened, her breath quickened.

"That's a swell idea," said Ted. "This trying to put a product over without getting folks together has been kind of getting me. I like to be where I can talk to a crowd of people. And say, I've got an idea, too. Give every farmer who's at the meeting enough of the blend to fill the tank of his car. They'll run for a few days on the blend, even if they never use again. Maybe they'll begin to talk about how smooth their cars run, and that they can trade their corn in. If we can just get folks to talking, we're set."

"H'm," said Stephen. "It would be pretty expensive advertising, you know, Ted. But it might be worth it, in the end." He considered. "And you'll have to drain their tanks, too. Can't mix the blend with straight gas."

"I can work out a way to do that easy," said Ted.

"Huh!" said Tiny. "If you let on beforehand you're going to fill their tanks with free blend, you won't find much in 'em to drain out."

71

HESTER went about the preparation of a program with an eagerness that, when she stopped to think of it, amused her. Why, I act like a prima donna on a first night, she said to herself with a little laugh.

An audience would meet a need, long frustrated. To play for herself had not been enough. There were two parts to an artist's work. To create was one. Response made the creation whole.

I wonder if I wouldn't like to play some folk songs, she said to herself. But when she went over her music, she found she had none. They'll have some phonograph records at the radio store, she thought. I believe I'll go down and see.

Hester came home full of excitement. From a number she had heard, she had chosen three records of American folk songs. On the way back, she had stopped at the Hodges' and had borrowed the children's portable phonograph.

As she had heard the records, she had had first a haunting sense of their beauty. These melodies were threaded through one of the great symphonies and they were melodies known and sung all over America. She knew now what she was going to do.

In the days that followed, Hester's spare time was filled to overflowing. She listened to the records, played the melodies on her violin. That would be her first group—these songs. Then with infinite care and effort, she made for her violin an adaptation from the score of the symphony, choosing a part of it that interwove these melodies.

It was in many ways a crude effort, she knew. But—she nodded her head—it's the kind of thing I want to do. American farmers—Germans, Scandinavians, Hungarians, Poles, Irish—their ancestors had danced and mourned to the fiddle's voice.

72

THE car was crowded, Hester and Stephen in the front seat, Jonas, Dr. and Mrs. Hodges in the back. Stephen had invited the Hodges to come along. Since the new organization, Hodges had given his services as Plant doctor. "Besides," he said to Stephen, "these farmers hereabouts all know me. I'm a business asset to you. If they know I trust you it will help."

Behind the car came the tank wagon, importantly driven by Ted.

Farmhouses, windmills, silos, empty fields, were caught for a passing instant in the car lights, as they drove twenty miles into the country. They turned from the main highway, bumping over an uneven dirt road, pausing now and

then to make certain they hadn't missed the schoolhouse where the meeting was to be held. Finally the car had to stop. The road ahead was blocked by another car.

"Hi, there, brother, need help?" Ted sang out from behind.

"Figured I'd just about get there. Miscalculated a mite. I'm plumb out of gas."

"Then I guess we're just the fellows you want to see," said Stephen. "Our tank car's just behind."

"Oh, it's you, is it?" the man said a trifle sheepishly. "I 'low as how I'm stretching your invitation a little."

"If you'll show us the road, we'll call it square," said Stephen.

The schoolhouse yard, barren of grass or trees, was full now of ranks of parked cars.

"Evidently something's been a tremendous attraction," said Jonas. "Possibly the free gas."

The sky to Hester seemed all out of proportion to the earth below it—the flat prairie drawn in and small. There were a few very clear stars.

"Careful," said Stephen, his hand on her elbow. "There's a step."

The light, very sharp from the open door, fell on the plank set on two blocks of wood that made the doorstep. Inside was a small entry, the floor and wainscoting scratched and worn. The hooks for coats and caps were low, for the children. In the corner was a wastebasket full of crumpled paper, beside it a child's square-toed rubbers.

They could see in the schoolroom, beyond, the grown-ups crowded into seats too small for them. Sitting on the desks in front of them, held securely, were babies of all sizes. Children were wandering up and down the aisles, stumbling over the grown-ups' feet. A board, weatherbeaten, rough, lay across two barrels in the rear. On it refreshments were laid out—fruit salad made of bananas, oranges, apples, tinted a deep pink. The cakes had pink frosting.

"Pretty, ain't they?" Hester heard the woman presiding over the long board whisper to another woman. "We did it with beet juice."

They were ushered to the front, into the first-grade seats. The men cramped their long legs into the narrow spaces between seats and desks.

"Good Lord!" said the doctor, under his breath. "What a custom!"

The program of songs and recitations given by the farmers' children was over at last. Now Hester was to play. Mothers hushed their babies. The men scowled, administered an occasional soft cuff to older children fidgeting in their seats. The room grew quiet.

Hester hoped they would like what she was going to play. She had put so much into it. But looking down, she saw the polite, glassy stare of people about to listen to music. At the end, they all applauded.

Well, thought Hester, at least it was a good try.

The evening was turned over to the Plant staff. Jonas, looking like a sleight-of-hand magician, with his bottles and test tubes, explained how corn was changed into alcohol, could be used to run tractors.

Stephen rose to speak, stopped to clear his throat. He found speaking hard, and he was a little nervous. But soon his nervousness left him. He settled to the sober discussion of the country's plight and the fight ahead of them all—a fight they'd have to share.

Hester felt an immense pride as she watched him. There was in his face the strength and determination of the good business man, which he always had had, even at the beginning of his career, but now added to it was something difficult to define—a new likableness that lay in the humor which softened his mouth and touched his eyes with warmth.

The meeting over, the men got their plates of cold meat and sandwiches and cups of coffee, then drew away to one side of the schoolroom, the women to the other. In a kind of

no-man's-land between, the children ate and scuffled with one another.

The knot of women around Hester had increased, now that the men were served and they were free.

"That was nice fiddlin', Mrs. Chase," said a little aged woman. "I ain't heard them songs fiddled so good since Chuck Davis died." The fine network of wrinkles on her face drew together and deepened as she smiled. "He was a great one for shufflin' songs together, too. It jes' wet my mouth for a little singin'."

"Oh, Auntie, now," said Mrs. Peters. "We didn't plan singing for tonight, you know. We'll bother the men. They want to talk business."

"Men's bothered *me* enough in my lifetime," said the old lady. "We can sing soft. You know this?" She began to hum in a cracked voice.

The tune was plaintive, touched with sentimentality, but it held something that they all, including Hester, understood—a childlike quality that belonged still to America. Hester picked it out on her violin.

"What you ladies doing over here?" Hodges' face appeared at the old lady's shoulder. "If I know you, Auntie Peters, there's going to be singing. Come on, what's holding us back?"

"We want to know how you're set up," Peters said to Stephen. "And how much of a market for corn you'll have. I've kept my head above water so far, but it's going to be hard sledding this year. If you're going to make a co-operative business out of this, I think farmers like me should back you up."

"That's exactly what we want," Stephen answered him.

"Jack, here, went to the state agricultural last winter," another man said. "He's been tellin' us about what we got to do to stick together. They say in these days a man can't just think of his own farm. We've got to stick together to kill

bugs, and we got to stick together to treat our land good. You think that's so?"

"Yes, I do," said Stephen. "And that's our idea, too."

"How do we know," said the man, "if we get our money in, you won't fold up on us?"

"I've got mine in," Stephen answered simply. "Your interests and mine will be the same. The more there are of you, the more controlling power you'll have."

"I'm going to think about it. I don't mind saying we got you here this evening so we could hear what you had to say for yourself."

"You think it over." Stephen saw that his only chance to get such men was to let them work it out slowly and carefully for themselves. But he believed he had at last made an opening wedge into the farm community.

Across the room, the singing was growing louder. One by one the men were drifting over to it.

"'Tain't no use to try to talk agin that," said one of the group around Stephen. "Might's well go help 'em out."

At last Stephen made his way through the crowd, touched Hester's shoulder. "Think we'd better get along. Ted's got most of the cars filled up with blend."

Standing for a moment in the schoolhouse door, the Chases looked down. The big tank wagon stood out in a center of lights focused from a ring of cars. Across its grey rounded sides fell the shadows of men, women with babies in their arms, the flitting shadows of children.

JACK PETERS came to the Plant and he brought his savings, counting it out in fives and tens until he had laid on Stephen's desk five hundred dollars. "It's all I've saved," he said, "but this is how I see we can pull ourselves out of this trouble we're in."

Peters proved not to be alone in his conviction. That curious, un-understandable passing of an idea into the group consciousness had taken place in the little group around him. The farmers were sold on the value of the blend.

74

THE worst snow storm since 1888, the New York papers said. But they had said that last year, when the storm came in November, and it was fourteen below in the city. It was only twelve below now, but it seemed colder, with the high wind blowing.

Perhaps, thought Mary, the weather seems worse because this winter's made such demands on everybody's strength.

Lennie was out of a job, and she had taken Jerry in to live with her. Lennie slept where he could. There was Jim Sawyer, too, who sometimes came in. The law office had let him out, with the rest of its newer men. How Jim got along, Mary didn't quite know.

I'd like walking in this snow, if I had boots on, she thought. The snow storm was beautiful last night, and this clear day with the wind and the snow blowing is beautiful. Wonder if Lennie and Jim got on snow removal.

The snow in the court outside her room threw a pale light that belied the winter dusk. She noticed as she opened the door that her easy chair had been pulled up so that feet could rest on the fire irons and on the floor beside it was a tray full of cigarette butts. Someone's been in to dry his feet, she thought. There's a little puddle of water. Len, I guess, or Jim. No, it's Lennie . . . he's burned up all the wood.

"Hi, Mary, open the door."

It was Jim Sawyer, with an armful of barrel staves. "Can I dry my feet by 'em?"

"Of course."

Jim dumped the sticks into the fireplace.

"Any luck?" Mary asked.

"Not to speak of." Jim, still in his overcoat, was kneeling, blowing the fire. The soles of his shoes, turned up and outward behind him, were soaked and pulpy, the heels worn off at the sides. He half-turned, and Mary saw his profile against the bright flames. His face looked paper thin, the nostrils pinched. Mary had a sudden remembrance of something Hester had told her when Stephen had been in the fur business . . . that tame silver foxes brought more money than wild ones because the wild ones sometimes went half-starved and their fur never lost the scar of those periods of privation. What about human beings? she thought. Can Jim ever get back to what he was? Our high standard doesn't seem to be worried about him.

Mary slipped into her coat. "I've got an errand. Be back."

Down the street the clear, searching wind poured unceasingly, driving the snow crystals with a hushing sound against walls and shop windows. Except for the elevated, the sound of traffic was muted. A few taxis rolled, skidding, around the snow-covered stillness of Washington Square.

At the delicatessen, Mary paid a quarter for three cans of thick soup. Tomorrow's lunch and carfare, she thought recklessly.

Jim flushed as he looked at Mary's package. "I ate," he said stubbornly.

"Help me open the cans and stick this over the gas. I've got to hustle. It's nearly six o'clock."

The smell of meat and vegetables, salted and peppered, filled the room.

"Len, I told you you can't come in without some wood." Mary turned to see Jerry standing in the door, blocking the way for Lennie.

"Cut it out. I'm tired." Lennie removed her hands from the door jambs.

Jerry sat down, looking a little pale. "You hurt me, Len, and you didn't need to."

"Don't bother me, then." Lennie sat down in Mary's arm-chair, his hat tilted forward over his eyes. "I'm freezing."

"Oh, come. Down in Texas you have bigger and better cold days than this." Jim's voice was bantering, but his eyes were hard and his hands were driven deep into his overcoat pockets. "Beat it out, Len, and round up a few packing cases."

"Lay off me. I've been tramping the streets all day."

"No, you haven't," said Mary.

"Okay, then, I'll go. But you know there isn't a packing case south of Fourteenth Street." He left, shutting the door behind him with a jarring slam.

"I should have gone with him," said Jerry. "We were here this afternoon and burned up the wood."

"He won't be gone long," said Jim dryly.

From the courtyard came a crash, a loud string of oaths. "Hey, Jim!"

Lennie was standing outside, a tower of packing cases in his arms. The top one had fallen off, the rest were swaying.

"I climbed over the fence back of the delicatessen. The wop had his garbage packed in these. I dumped it. Nine of 'em. What you got—soup? Hot dog! Let's dig in. Wish we had some liquor."

"You said it!" Jerry's voice was high and shrill.

75

THE writers of the new popular songs had their fingers on the wrist of a public out of a job. What songs would people whose lives were touched on all sides by lost security pay to hear? The depression jazz was charged with an uneasy gaiety, bleak and cynical.

"Once I built a tower
To the sun,
Beam and rivet and lime.

Once I built a tower—
Now it's done.
Brother, can you spare a dime?"*

Mary looked out at the faces blurred through the haze of tobacco smoke around them. Individual desperate struggle for existence blotted out. All of them by music welded into an emotional solidarity, in which each found some temporary refuge. She was eased as they were, the anxiety of effort just to get along mercifully deadened.

As she put down her violin after her last number, she saw young Jo pushing his way through the aisles of crowded tables.

"Jo, I guess I'm all in," she pleaded. "I won't be cheerful company."

"Let me see you for a little."

"Then you'll have to buy me a dinner, darling."

He took her into a quiet restaurant, ordered for her. Mary ate, almost gulping the hot food. Jo had ordered himself a drink.

She noticed first his fingers tight on the stem of the glass, then, glancing up, she saw that Jo was white and his thin features were set. He's been drinking, thought Mary with a start.

He lifted his glass, set it down with a precise movement. "I have had a busy day, my dear. The kind of day an important man, bearing responsibilities, should have." His speech was as precise as his movements. "You might like to know, my dear, how much money the Tuttle family has saved today. A little matter of a half million, perhaps. That their precious flesh may be wrapped in expensive furs and decorated with fine jewels."

"Hush, dear," said Mary. "They'll hear you at the other tables."

He bowed elaborately to the room, making elaborate apol-

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ogy. In a lower tone, still precise, he went on. "I've received a great gift today, Mary. My father had my inheritance deeded to me. In case you don't know, we thus avoid inheritance taxes."

She wished he wouldn't break through the decent reserve he had always kept.

"I'm a rich man, Mary. A rich man, with pocket money. The old man is still boss. I've a gentleman's agreement with him that he shall manage it as before. Son not trusted by cautious parent. And yet I have power over men. My father deeded to me the Alcohol Plant. Steve, now, when he wants to keep his business going, must beg from me. I heard him beg my father once. And you, Mary, my sweetheart, get a dinner now and then out of the Tuttle wealth. Like some caviar, Mary?"

Blindly she put her hand out to him across the table, for the first time in all the bitter months struggling with tears she could not keep back.

76

THIS spring, the Plant did not have to draw on its capital. They were breaking even at last, though not running to capacity. There was a steady, if restricted, demand for their product.

The men worked with contentment. The problems and all the manifold business arrangements, with which they had had to concern themselves, had been a good deal of strain to most of them. They were glad now that things had settled down, that they could be left just to do their work. Tension went out of their lives. They could begin to pay up their back bills, to Hodges, to Slim at the grocery store.

"We're at it again." Bebbidge addressed the Corliss engine as he looked lovingly up at its seven-foot flywheel and the shining, spinning thick leather belt. "Hope you don't need

any new duds for a while, though. Takes the flanks of a lot of good steers to make that belt of yours, honey."

77

CARS coming from the west, this spring, had their paint pitted with sharp dust, windshield glass scoured and blurred. Fine and thin, sometimes, the multicolored dust of other states blew along the streets of Colfax, grey, red, black.

Jonas Smith had rented a neglected farm, was working on the breeding of hybrid corn, trying for a corn that could withstand drought.

"If there's a cycle of drought, we've got to have a product when the surplus of corn's gone," he fretted. He sweated himself day and night, getting up at four to tend his crops, watching with a love almost maternal his Kaffir corn standing vigorous in the midst of the drought. His highly bred Indian corn was stunted, unable to put forth its leaves.

"Kaffir corn is what the farmers should grow, while we've got drought," he told Stephen. "What makes them so pig-headed? Why won't they try new crops?"

"You forget," said Stephen, "that the same stubborn mind that resists a change of crops is what we hope to set as stubbornly for the blend. We're banking on that stubbornness for our sales. Besides, we've got last year's big surplus of corn to go on."

"I fret myself too much," said Smith.

"Yes, you do, Jonas. But you work things out, too."

Stephen thought of the carefully tended acre of bottom-land on Jonas's farm, which he had reclaimed from the abused, worn-out fields. The eroded earth, one gully joining another, deepening and widening, finally careening sharply over steep banks into a gorge slashed deep into the soil. And he saw Jonas, as he had seen him one day standing on the wasted knoll above his lonely bachelor house.

AT THE noon hour, Stephen had gone up to the laboratory to talk over with Seaton the ordering of a shipment of malt from the breweries in Wisconsin. The business finished, he leaned back on his stool. "We're coming along, Paul," he said. "This month I've dared to draw my first deep breath."

"So have I," said Seaton. "I've had some good news, too." In his face was a shy happiness. "Muriel told me yesterday. She's already better since she found out."

"An addition? That's fine, Paul!" Stephen had known for some time of Paul's anxiety over Muriel.

The telephone rang. Blanche said from the office, "There's a telegram, Mr. Chase."

"Telegram? Repeat it," said Stephen. "H'm." He took out his watch. If Jo Tuttle wanted to see him enough to wire him to come to New York, it must be important. He could take the night train from Kansas City. "Could you drive me over to K.C. tonight, Paul?"

"Oh, gladly," said Seaton.

Stephen called Hester. "Hester, I've got to go to New York. I've had a wire from Jo asking me to come."

"Is something wrong, Stephen?" she asked him anxiously. Her mind had not yet fully accepted this new security.

"It must be something personal. I don't see why he should send for me otherwise," said Stephen. "Almost anything, he could write me. I don't like leaving you alone," he went on, noticing how quickly she had become anxious.

"Oh, Stephen, couldn't I go along this time?"

"It would be nice to have you." He hesitated. "We couldn't very well take Tim—"

Seaton broke in. "Muriel and I could take care of Tim. Muriel would like it."

"Wait a minute, Hester," said Stephen. He lowered the receiver. "Sure you wouldn't mind, Paul?"

"Oh, no. Tim might, but if you'd like, we could stay at your house."

They packed their bags, Tim a sobered spectator. He didn't think much of this.

"You'll be very good, won't you, Tim?" said Hester.

"There's the car," said Stephen. He felt a sudden joy that at last he could afford again to take Hester with him.

Hester bent down, kissed Tim. Now that the moment for leaving him had come, she didn't think much of it, either. "We'll be back soon. It's only for a little while, darling. Mrs. Paul will take you to see the monkey."

"Okay," said Tim, in imitation of his present idol, Ted Jones. His lip trembled only a little. With Muriel, he stood on the curb waving good-by.

79

THE self-assured receptionist in Jo's outer office was gone, and Stephen caught himself feeling a little secret satisfaction, although, he supposed, it meant one more person out of work.

Young Jo ushered him into his father's office. "Dad'll be in in a minute," he said. "How are you, anyway, Steve? Hester with you, this time?"

"Yes, she is," said Stephen with some pride. "What's up, Jo? Why does your father want to see me?"

"I don't know. Did he send for you?"

Stephen was unprepared for the Jo Tuttle who entered. His tendency toward heaviness had changed into fat. His black hair lay thin across the top of his head. There was a pinched look about his mouth. He was flushed and irritable looking. To see the genial Jo like this was a shock.

But Jo gripped Stephen's hand with the old warmth. "Awfully glad to see you, Steve. You made good time. I knew you would when I wired you. You're the kind that does"

Stephen felt pleasure at the confidence Jo was expressing in him.

"Sit down. Jo, you beat it. I want to talk to Steve."

Young Jo turned obediently to the door, but Stephen did not miss the slight shrug of his shoulders.

"I know you were busy," Jo went on, "but I had to talk to you confidentially, Steve."

"Anything wrong, Jo?"

"Things are in a bad way."

"Don't I know it! You should see the Middle West, Jo. The country's pretty desperate."

"We're all desperate," said Jo. "I've had to ask for help from the banks in the last six months. I'm taking a licking. The implement business has dropped to the lowest level in years. My business is sound so far, but it won't be if the banks shut down on me."

Stephen was stunned. It was inconceivable that the banks should shut down on a business like Jo's. Why should they? And he was bewildered. Other than with sympathy, just how could he help?

"I'm talking to you as my closest friend, Steve. You remember I told you when you started the Plant that the banks wouldn't trust my judgment if I went into something the experts didn't consider a good bet?"

"Yes," said Stephen. "But you didn't go in, Jo."

"They seem to think I've used bad judgment in encouraging you at this time. Bad to have a new undertaking start up that might make inroads on one of the main businesses of the country. I'm not saying it's all of them getting the jitters, but two or three of them who are interested in our petroleum business don't like it. What we need now is confidence. They think to interfere in any way, just now, with the big concerns might retard recovery. Everyone is trying to hang on to the market left to him."

"They don't need to worry yet a while." Stephen spoke a trifle sardonically. "My small Plant benefits one locality.

We don't intend to put alcohol in all the gas in the country."

"It's their business to look ahead and see what's in the future," said Jo.

"It's their business," Stephen retorted, "to know that even if the blend were used over the whole country, it would take care of the farmers' unsold corn and so give the oil companies an increased market for their gas. The farmer can't buy gas unless he has money. We're trying to see that he has money."

"They don't think that's true," said Jo.

"If he can't sell his corn, he won't *have* any money. Don't be such a fool, Jo." Stephen felt himself getting mad.

"Calm down," said Jo. "I'm only trying to explain how it looks to New York, the center of the money market. It may be we're unduly scared here about the depression."

"I think you are," Stephen answered, ashamed that he had lost patience with Jo. But he hated this fear that men with money seemed to have. "Probably you know things we don't," he conceded, to make up for his shortness.

"Exactly," said Jo, then stopped for a moment. "It's about the lease on the Plant I wanted to talk to you, Steve. It's hard to draw a lease that can stand up technically."

Stephen stared at him. "You mean, there's a flaw in it?" he said.

"I mean if you and I agreed there was, there could be. It would be an easy out for you, if I had the right to sell the Plant. I wouldn't let you down, Steve. I'd see that you came out all right."

"Have the big interests suggested this way for us to fold up?" Stephen searched Jo's face for an answer.

"Look at it sensibly, Steve. Here's a big gas business, the backbone of trade in the country. Isn't it more important than that little Plant of yours? We could probably see that none of the investors actually lost anything. I'd try to arrange that part."

"It isn't that, Jo."

"What is it, then?"

The issues seemed so mixed that Stephen didn't know just what he did think. Jo knew general conditions better than he did. Besides, he owed Jo a lot.

"I'd see you didn't suffer," Tuttle urged. As Stephen did not answer, he added a little lamely, "These things often happen in business."

"I'm in so deep with everybody," said Stephen at last. "The farmers, the men . . . Isn't there something else we could do—promise to hold our business to a certain small section, keep to an agreed per cent?"

Tuttle stared down at the beautiful appointments of his desk. "No," he said.

"I guess, Jo, I'll have to think it over. I can't decide so suddenly. I'll try to tell you this afternoon. If you want me before, you can call me." He wrote the name of his hotel and the number of his room on Jo's memorandum pad. "If you don't, I'll be around about five. You'll be alone then. We can talk."

"Sure, Steve," said Jo with forced heartiness. "Take your time. I'd like to see you back here in New York. I've missed you."

That simple appeal to his personal friendship moved Stephen deeply. Only when he was out of the office did he realize fully the implications of what Jo had said to him. It seemed a rather shady deal. Jo, of all people! Or was it shady? The issues were so tangled. And he owed Jo a great deal. Owed him . . . why, he owed him his chance to leave Doogan's outfit!

Suppose Jo took this lease business to court? The Plant couldn't afford such a suit, even if it won in the end. After all, if the big interests wanted to kill the business, couldn't they do it? Weren't they giving him and his men a break by suggesting this way out? If he didn't take it—well, they might be hard on him next time. He was under no illusions as to their ability to be hard. Efficient, they call it, he said, with

a wry smile. Then he pulled himself up. I'm through with bitterness. At least, I thought I was.

Why not give up all this struggle—by virtue of the work he had done, move at last into the success he and Hester deserved? That was what Jo meant about having him back in New York. Jo had probably meant a good job in his own office. Such success had come to other men. Why not to him? If he could only believe that his responsibility went no further than Hester and Tim—his own family—and his lifelong friend, Jo. Security. At his age, life was either very secure or very uncertain. A man nearing fifty was either near the top, considered very valuable in business, or near the bottom, about ready to be discarded. But to accept would mean to sell out the men at the Plant. He had to face that issue squarely.

He walked on, a man past middle age, greying a little about the temples, looking into a deeply troubled civilization, in which man faces and temporizes with the problem that his own integrity is rooted in society.

80

A DAY like the one on which Stephen had returned from China, thought Hester, as she went out into the city. That same clarity of spring light. From their quiet hotel, she walked west to Fifth Avenue. The city where she had first found shelter. If New York were worse hit than the country, it certainly didn't look it. The grandeur of the skyscrapers was undiminished, the shop windows along Fifth Avenue full of luxuries.

She would see Vera Lichens first, then hunt up Mary. She might have only this day before Stephen was ready to start back.

Vera had a new address. A studio farther uptown.

"Where did you drop from?" cried Vera, when Hester came into the studio. "This is the very nicest thing that has hap-

pened to me in ages." She went on. "Are you here for long?"

"No. Perhaps only today." Hester looked around. Good to be back again in a place given over to music. In Vera, she sensed immediately a deep absorption. "Are you busy, Vera?" she asked a little uncertainly. "Should I have interrupted you?"

"Of course, my dear. Sit down."

"What are you doing now, Vera? You haven't been very good about writing."

"I'm playing with a small group of musicians to a selected audience," said Vera.

For a moment Hester wondered if Vera, like so many others, had been pinched by the depression.

But Vera went on, "I'll be frank with you, Hester. You won't think it's boasting, I know. I've had invitations to conduct orchestras in other cities. I refused them, to stay here."

"Why?" asked Hester in astonishment.

"Because here I get what I want out of my art. Constant contact with the best in my profession. Music in its purity. I can afford it now. Teaching isn't such a necessity either."

Hester was silent. Music to her must be woven into an everyday existence. "Vera," she said suddenly, "you're talking about luxury. As once you talked about it to me."

"Why, nonsense," said Vera. "I'm working harder than I've ever worked in my life."

"A magnificent art like yours belongs to the many," said Hester. "You're halfway up the steps of an ivory tower, Vera, one of the group setting art aside as something only for the few."

"That, of course, Hester, is the layman point of view," said Vera. She smiled, but Hester could see the discussion was distasteful to her.

"Well, we won't quarrel about it, my dear," Hester said. "Maybe we shan't see each other again for another two years."

"And you?" asked Vera, turning the tables.

"Oh, you know me," said Hester lightly. "Just pottering about." She had meant to tell about the program at the farm meeting, get some advice on some other things she had been working at since. But it might shock Vera, she thought, such a use of great music.

"And you admonish me!" said Vera, truly disturbed about Hester.

"What can you tell me of Mary Trencher?" asked Hester, dropping the subject.

"Not much," said Vera. "Wasted, like a lot of others. She's playing in some kind of cheap restaurant downtown. Imagine . . . Mary! All I can do is to make her come to me to study." For a moment Hester saw the old Vera of indignant protest.

"Can I get hold of her?" she asked.

"Not easily. The corner drugstore will call her sometimes, if they're not too busy."

"I'd better take a chance on finding her in, then," Hester decided.

The hallway was dark. Hester, leaning close, saw Mary's name tacked on a door. To her knock, the door opened quickly.

They stood looking at each other. Neither spoke. Then they were laughing, with that old amusement and pleasure they used to have in each other's presence.

"You, Hester . . . it struck me funny . . . seeing each other again like this."

"And me," said Hester. "Let me look at you, Mary. You're thinner, and," she added, her hands on Mary's shoulders, "you're lovely."

"It's nice of you, Hester."

She is, thought Hester. She's lovely. Some hardness has gone out of her since I saw her last.

"Take my easy chair," said Mary. "Now, tell me what you've been doing."

"No, you first," demanded Hester. Only now had she realized Mary's surroundings. This spring afternoon the sun shone wanly in the room. What it must have been in the winter! Hester thought. What's Jo thinking of? Or is that all over, I wonder?

"Not much to tell," said Mary. "You've seen Vera? Then she's told you what I'm doing. Vera thinks it's terrible. She teaches me in a kind of frenzy—works me hard. But it's awfully good of her. Do you think it's terrible . . . I mean, my playing as I do?"

"No, I don't. Perhaps I should. And Jo?" Hester ventured the question.

Mary looked sober. "Things are where they were two years ago." She paused. "And yet they're not. Hester . . . once Jo just drifted. He still does, only now he's unhappy. It's good to have you to talk to, Hester. I don't know . . . I'm not so sure Jo knows what ties his hands, binds him so tightly into his family. His mother brought him up to be a rich man's idle son. He's her work of art." Mary spoke a little bitterly. "I think he's what she thought she could make of old Jo when she married him. As long as she can do what she likes with her son, in some curious way, it saves his father. It's as if Jo deliberately made himself weak to protect his father. He loves him."

"Does his father realize?" asked Hester.

"Oh, no! His father wouldn't accept a sacrifice like that, if he knew. He just thinks Jo is a waster. That's what destroys Jo. I've been so afraid that someday he'll accept his father's estimate of him."

"He has you, Mary?"

"Yes. In a way."

Hester took Mary's hand, clasped the strong fingers.

"And you?" asked Mary. "What about you, Hester?" Having told her perplexities, she wanted to get back to everyday happenings.

Hester told her about Colfax and the Plant. "We're all

bound up together, Mary. We're like a row of dominoes—if one goes, we all go. It was young Jo's idea, you know, Mary, the men taking over the Plant."

"Was it?" Mary's face glowed. "Really? He's never told me."

"We didn't know for a time whether we'd make it. But we're on our feet now, Mary." Hester rushed on, telling a thousand little things. Then, at last, she said, "You know, I believe I've found where I can use my music. I've brought a score I've been working on. It's unfinished. But I'd like to know what you think of it."

81

STEPHEN waited for Hester. The difficult decision ahead of him was a burden carried through the hours of his waiting. His muscles felt heavy, as if from great physical strain. Not easy to fool Hester. She shared his life so closely now. He remembered how they had drifted apart in those days when he had had to practice subterfuge. If he did what Jo asked, subterfuge would be with him the rest of his life.

The telephone rang.

"Steve? This is young Jo." Jo's voice sounded frightened. "Dad's been taken sick. He wants to see you. Can you get here right away? Here, at the office. We haven't been able to move him."

"I'll be there quickly, Jo." As he turned, Hester entered.

"I'm glad you've come. I've been wanting to talk to you all the afternoon, Hester. I had a decision to make about the Plant."

"Can't you tell me now, Stephen?"

"No. Young Jo just 'phoned. His father . . . Jo . . . some kind of a sick spell at the office."

He knew now he never could have told her what Jo had asked. He'd already decided against the betrayal of his men.

He hurried into his coat, into a taxi, into the express elevator at Jo's office building. In the reception room, young Jo was waiting for him.

"I'll see if you can go in." Jo left Stephen for a moment.

Almost immediately the doctor came out of Jo's private office. "He insists on seeing you, Mr. Chase, and I've given in to him. But don't let him get excited. It might be fatal."

"What is it?"

"Shock," said the doctor tersely.

"Bad?"

The doctor looked at him, waved his hand toward the private office door.

Jo lay on the floor, evidently where he had fallen. They had put a pillow under his head, a light blanket over him. Even beneath the blanket, the rigid, unyielding lines of half of Jo's body were evident. His eyes were closed, his mouth drawn up at the left corner, held there as if in satiric laughter.

"Here's Steve, Dad." Young Jo spoke gently, leaning over the sick man.

"Leave us alone." Jo did not open his eyes, spoke with difficulty. "Steve." He put out his right hand, fumbling for Stephen's. There was affection in the tone, not to be missed even in the queer muffled speech. "Not much chance for me . . . the one man I can trust . . . feeling you had about your men . . . stood up to a big test . . ." He stopped.

Stephen waited, moved a little at last, thinking he ought to call the doctor and young Jo. Jo's hand drew him back. Thickly, Jo spoke again. "I need you . . . young Jo . . . I don't know what's in him. He's never . . . perhaps a mistake . . . never had to fight . . . Steve . . . Jo's soft. I need you to steady him . . . to put guts into him."

"I'll look after him, Jo, if he needs it."

"Breckinridge . . . out for himself . . . always has been. Young Jo trusts you, Steve . . . he'll do what you say . . . arrange it before I go, beyond question . . . I want you in the firm."

Jo was asking him to return his many kindnesses, and with it making him a dazzling offer. An offer he couldn't take. Jo was ignoring that. To him, it didn't count. Small men were helped if possible, but sacrificed if necessary to hold together fortunes like his own. There was no more time to think. Jo must have his answer now.

"Jo," he said gently, "it's a wonderful offer. I appreciate it. But I'm obligated to the men in the Plant. Let me help young Jo all I can . . . advise him. But I've got responsibilities I can't drop, Jo."

In the taciturn friendship of men, Stephen could not manage to say more. How much he loved Jo he could hardly express to himself.

A look of shocked incredulity passed across the rich man's face, the muscles not already twisted, twisting in amazement and anger. Steve not willing to help him out! "Call Jo," he said, in a voice impersonal and cold.

And Stephen, standing back while the doctor and young Jo took charge, knew that whether Jo lived or died, their friendship was ended. I've been just a stubborn fool, he said to himself.

"Get me . . . to a hospital, Jo," he heard the sick man say to his son.

"Can I help any?" Stephen asked young Jo as the ambulance drove away.

"I haven't called Mother yet. Dad wouldn't let me," Jo said.

"We must, at once," said Stephen quickly. "Suppose I go get her, and break it to her as gently as I can and bring her back?"

"If you would. I'm awfully glad you're here, Steve. Go in Dad's car. I'll take a taxi to the hospital."

I wonder, thought Stephen, as he rode along Park Avenue, if all Jo said to me this morning, all his worry about my business being a drag on recovery could possibly be just the apprehension of a sick man?

As the car drew up before the spacious apartment house, Stephen paused a moment to get himself together for the difficult task ahead of him. "You'd better wait here," he said to Jo's chauffeur. "We'll be going right back."

"Is the boss bad?" asked the man. His face was working. "I hope nothing's going to happen to him. He's been kind to me."

"We don't know yet," Stephen answered.

Mrs. Tuttle came across the drawing room. Evidently she was about to go out, for she was dressed for the evening. Her backless dress was superb in cut and material. The beautiful pearls of her necklace set off her clear skin.

"It's nice of you to drop in, Stephen. Jo is late, as usual." Her voice had its politely casual tone, but it conveyed to Stephen, in some subtle way her social training had taught her, her wish that at this hour he should not linger.

"I just left Jo. He wanted me to explain to you why he is delayed."

A little line of annoyance came between Mrs. Tuttle's beautifully arched brows. "He knows this dinner is important. If you'll excuse me, I'll just call him."

"Mrs. Tuttle." Stephen did not remember that for years until tonight he had called her by her first name. He put out his hand to detain her. "Jo isn't at the office. He wasn't well this afternoon. They thought it better to take him to a hospital."

Her eyelids flickered an instant, then her eyes searched his face. "Where is my son? Why didn't he come for me?"

"He's with his father."

"Jo is very sick then."

"I'm afraid so. I came out in his car. When you're ready—"

"I'll be down in a moment." She turned.

Stephen watched her going along the hall to the stairs. Her control had been complete. Did she love Jo? Stephen wondered. Hidden under her cold, formal exterior, was there warmth and tenderness for Jo? Jo, always so friendly?

The hospital was beginning its early morning routine when finally young Jo came out of his father's room. "It's over, Steve," he said.

Stephen put a hand on his shoulder. "Is there anything I can do for you, Jo?"

"No. You'll be around a while?"

"Yes," said Stephen.

82

EVEN the death of his friend Ho in China had not seemed so terrible for Stephen as the death of Jo. Ho's friendship had never been withdrawn. Stephen was older now, too, and knew a friend like Jo could never be replaced.

He could not rouse out of his absorption in Jo's death, his knowledge of the part he, perhaps, had played in it. Inextricably bound into his grief, too, was anxiety.

How much of what Jo had told him was the fabrication of a sick mind? Or did big business see in the Plant's product the entering wedge that would split apart monopoly, threaten big profits in the future? Stephen pulled up sharply before a knowledge that he could not ignore. Each colored marker that had gone into the advancing line of markers on the big map in Middleton's office, had meant the closing out, by persuasion or force, of a small, independent business. Men who had themselves seized upon opportunity, created magnificent equipment, did fear a little business like his own.

To all come moments of doubt and bewilderment, when they lean heavily upon those they love. Such a moment had come to Stephen, and he leaned upon Hester for assurance. By the mysterious exchange of strength which two people long together sometimes learn to give each other, Hester had no fear, now that Stephen's fears were greatest.

"Was I right, Hester? If I could just feel I had done the intelligent thing, let alone the right. Wouldn't I, perhaps, better have done what Jo wanted? Maybe I can't save

the Plant anyway. 'Then I've lost my chance to save us.'

"How it will come out no one can say," she said. "That's the chance you've got to take, isn't it, dear? But I think you did the only thing you could have done."

Hester was almost as aware of the problems of the men and women at the Plant as she was of their own. She knew Mrs. Stackpole's renunciation. With a curious reality come out of her past experience, she partook of Muriel Seaton's quiet return to sanity in the expectation of her child.

"You were right, Stephen," she said again. "We've got responsibilities that we can't let go."

"Hester, that isn't all. Jo . . . suppose I had a part in his death? I did in Ho's." Stephen bowed his head in his hands. Suddenly he was shaken with hard, dry sobs.

He had no feeling that he was asking too much of her. She was a part of him, as his grief was a part of him. She sat down on the arm of his chair, gently pulling him toward her until his head rested against her breast. She could say nothing that would lessen his feeling for his broken friendship with Jo. She could only offer him shelter as he groped his solitary way to understanding with himself.

83

JO'S FUNERAL was by invitation, to be held at the fashionable church which the Tuttles attended and so amply supported.

A heavy blanket of roses lay across Jo's coffin. There were no other flowers. The frugality of good taste had seen to it that Jo's funeral should be simple.

Like the others, Stephen paused a moment at Jo's side. The twisted grimace that he had not been able to forget, skilled and costly science had erased from Jo's face. He looked serene and noble. So I can remember him, thought Stephen, passing on to his seat.

The rector of the church entered in the vestments of his office, took his place. In a voice as serene as Jo's features, he

drew the man, Josiah Tuttle, philanthropist. "Only a few of us know of his many gifts."

Nothing of the strife or struggle of the market place was to mar this hour. No mention was made of Jo as business man, no mention of the world of finance, where the temper of his spirit had been wrought.

"I shall read," said the serene voice in conclusion, from *Ecclesiastes*, "The Coming of Evil Days," for we pay tribute to a man who has upheld his civilization in these evil times which have come upon us."

Mary Trencher heard the mystic and cryptic words fall like notes of music in the silent church.

In the day when the keepers of the house
shall tremble,
And the strong men shall bow themselves,
And the grinders cease because they are few,
And those that look out of the windows be
darkened,
And the doors shall be shut in the streets,
When the sound of the grinding is low,

.

And the grasshopper shall be a burden,
Because man goeth to his long home,
And the mourners go about the streets:
Or ever the silver cord be loosed,
Or the golden bowl be broken,
Or the pitcher be broken at the fountain,
Or the wheel broken at the cistern:
Then shall the dust return to the earth,
As it was;
And the spirit return unto God
Who gave it.

Somehow the words quieted Mary. Now that he was gone, she knew, in spite of everything, that she had cared for the father of Jo. In other circumstances, they would have been

friends. Old Jo, friendly, comfortable. She wished his own kind had been there to mourn for him. The quiet, composed faces around her indicated no great grief.

Then she caught a glimpse of young Jo's face. He had loved him.

84

Two things kept Stephen another day in New York. He had promised to help young Jo if he could. And then there was his own urgent business with young Jo about the Plant.

He telephoned Jo. First, he must find out just what difficulties were ahead of the boy.

"I'm busy in the morning with Mother, Steve, but how about somewhere around noon?" He named a quiet place where they might meet.

Stephen, there a little ahead of Jo, watched him as he came in. He's pretty broken, he thought, over his father's death. If I can put confidence into him, he'll be all right. He saw now how he could serve his dead friend better than if he had gone into the firm to protect Jo—show Jo how to protect himself.

"Jo," he said, "your father asked me to come into the firm, and I couldn't accept his offer. I think you understand why I couldn't better than he did."

Young Jo nodded.

"But I promised him I'd advise you, if I could. Do you need it?"

"Yes."

"I know some of the things you'll be up against. In a couple of hours, Jo, I can outline in a general way what I think might be tried by people inside the firm, or outside, to keep you from getting any real power. I know you can line up a situation quickly. You've been in your father's office a long time. You know the set-up."

Again Jo had the sense of stature in his own eyes that Stephen had given him that time in Colfax. "All right," he said. "Let's go. This is what Tom Breckinridge suggested to me over the 'phone." He gave Stephen a concise picture.

"Good," said Stephen. "That's a fine example of what might happen. I didn't know Tom Breckinridge in college for nothing. Here's where I think that set-up would put you, Jo."

To his satisfaction he saw, as they talked on, that Jo's mind had a ready grasp of the realities of business strategy.

"And now, Jo," Stephen said, "you can talk over my problem with me."

Jo grinned. "You make me feel like a million dollars, Steve."

"I'm in a queer position," said Stephen. "An outsider might say that I, too, am trying to influence you to my own advantage. That, Jo, is for you to decide. But I've got to act quickly. Your father sent for me to come to New York. It had to do with the lease on the Plant. Did you know about it?"

"No," said Jo.

As Stephen explained, a number of things Jo hadn't been able to understand were clear to him—especially his father's anxiety over credit at the bank, when they all knew that the implement business was sound.

"What do you want to do about it, Steve? I take it you want to save your business."

"Yes," said Stephen. "In the lease, we have the right to buy the Plant at any time. My idea is to buy it. When we made the agreement, the property was valued at \$130,000. Frankly, with the depression, it's not worth that now. What I'd like to do is offer the Tuttle Implement Company \$75,000, which is a fair price now, and one that we can meet, over a period. Tom will try to block me I know, but—"

"No, he won't," said Jo. "The Plant's my personal property, Steve. Dad deeded it to me some time ago, when he gave Jane and me our inheritance."

"Good Lord!" said Stephen. "Then I *am* trying to influence you. By selling to me you'd be in the same tight spot with the banks your father was." He drew a long breath. "I guess it's off then, Jo."

"I'm going to sell to you," said Jo. "I'm a young fool. Irresponsible. Everybody knows that. I know these lads who were driving at Dad. If I sell now, before they have a chance to talk to me, they'll think it the act of a raw boy. Over-influenced, if you like, by you. You'll have to take that blame, Steve, and whatever comes of it. But *fait accompli*, they won't do much to me. How soon can you act? You'll have to get the vote of the Plant staff, and I'll have to get hold of my lawyer about the deeds."

"Three days," said Stephen. "But Jo . . . in three days they can get to you a dozen times."

"No, they can't," said Jo. "I won't be around. I've a feeling if my granddaddy were doing this, he'd take some time off right now for very personal business. Mine, I think, will be getting married."

A slow smile spread over Stephen's face. "You don't need any advice from me, Jo."

"Come on, then." Jo pushed back his chair. "Let's go, then. We've both got things to make legal."

JO WENT soberly toward the subway. He had gone to his interview with Stephen in bewilderment. The quality of his mother's grief over his father's death, he was beginning to see, was not the same as his own. At first he had admired her—how self-contained she was, showing to the world, even to him, a face of quiet acceptance. He had been gentle, dreading the time when she must, of necessity, break.

But this morning he had been in her sitting room when

the beautiful new wardrobe, all of black, had come in from her *couturier*, and had seen her very real delight.

"Black suits me, doesn't it, Jo?" she had said, turning to him for admiration.

Through the afternoon, while he and Stephen were discussing the problems that his father's going had left, Jo had begun to realize that his mind took hold of such problems as a workman's hand took hold of a tool. He had had a surge of confidence in himself, and then had come a sudden realization that he must handle his own life.

Mary had been playing over the scribbled score that Hester had left her. It wasn't finished, as Hester had said, only a beginning, crude in spots, but something in it was American to the core and it was good. She put down her violin, wishing Jo would come. Jerry might be in any minute, and then they wouldn't be alone.

His knock sounded. She opened the door. There he stood, slim, just escaping elegance in his manner and dress, the special look of tenderness for her in his eyes.

"Hello, Mary. Get your hat on. We're going places."

"Where are we going, Jo?"

"To the City Hall," said Jo. "For a license, and then to a justice of the peace. Of course, all the Tuttles get married in a church, Mary. Would you rather?"

"I ought to give notice at the honky-tonk. . . ." When Mary had the most to say she could say the least.

"You can," he said. "After we're married. Tonight. I've got notices to give, too."

JO CAME in through the door of his mother's sitting room. She was lying on the couch, a soft blue robe over her knees. But even her negligée was black.

"You've been away such a long time, Jo, and so soon after your father . . ."

He sat down beside her. "Beautiful, I've been very busy. I had a long conference with Stephen about business."

"I can't see why you should be concerned with Stephen, Jo. Is he more important than I am?"

"Not he, but his business," said Jo. "Mother, I was married this afternoon."

Mrs. Tuttle sat up suddenly, all the wanness and all the gentleness gone. "Without my consent? You didn't, Jo . . . you wouldn't dare!"

The cold anger in her face, her voice, shocked Jo. In all the days of his life with her, he had never seen her like this. He got up, went to the door, stood looking at her.

Her anger seemed to leap at him like something that could destroy. "You're a weak fool, Jo!"

He knew now why his father, through the years, had let her have her way. Jo felt grief and a sense of indescribable loss. For to him, now, his mother was only a spoiled woman, growing old in selfishness. He went out, softly closed the door behind him.

87

AS THE early morning train pulled into Colfax, Hester scanned the platform eagerly to see if the Seatons had brought Tim down. But she could see only Paul.

"I didn't bring Tim," Paul said, noting her quick glance around. "It's kind of a queer day. I'd say there was going to be a twister somewhere, except it doesn't seem quite like twister weather."

"Perhaps there'll be rain," said Stephen, still hopeful, not yet trained to drought as it existed on the prairies.

The sky was clear, but there was a coppery light about the sun. Along the horizon were billowing dark clouds.

"Looks like one of them dust storms they tell about, a little farther west, coming this way," said the station master. "We ain't never had a real one here." He studied the sky.

"That's coming fast," said Paul. "We'd better hurry home."

Muriel met them at the door. She was nervous and distraught. "The sky looks so awful," she said.

"Where's Tim?" asked Hester quickly, not seeing him.

"He ran away from me," said Muriel. "I couldn't seem to comfort him. He's down cellar."

"Tim," Hester called. "Where are you, darling? It's Mummy."

"I'm down here." Tim's voice came faintly from below.

Hurrying down the cellar stairs, Hester saw him dimly in a corner.

"The boys said it was a twister and to run for it," he called to her. "Mrs. Paul was scared, too."

Hester slipped her arm around his shoulders. "It's all right, dear."

Suddenly he swung around, buried his head against her, sobbing. Gently she smoothed his hair, her fingers touching the beautiful strong nape of his neck, passing down his straight little spine. "Tim, dear." She bent down. "Tell Mother."

"I was scared."

"Of what, dear? Of the dark sky? It isn't a twister, it's only the dust blowing. You've got me and Daddy to take care of you. Daddy's home, darling. Let's not let him know we've been crying, shall we?"

"It's this queer darkness, Stephen," she said in explanation, as Stephen looked at Tim's tear-stained face.

"Muriel and I'd better be on our way," said Paul, "before the storm gets worse."

"I'm awfully grateful to you," said Hester, as they hurried away.

Against the windows the dust was striking like fine metallic

rain. Already it lay along the sills, drifted under the doors. The air in the room was full of it. They coughed often. Outside, it closed around the house in a brown blizzard.

Nobody can go out in this, thought Stephen. To be delayed just now! Jo had warned him to act quickly. All he could do was to call Evans and see if he could arrange for another loan, explain to him that they had the opportunity to buy the Plant.

Evans was encouraging, offered him an arrangement similar in detail to the one they had had before.

One by one, he called up his men, his farmer members. Slow business, explaining to them the importance of an early meeting. He had thought it might be ticklish business to convince them of the necessity for buying the Plant. The lease had two years to run, and he had feared that some of them might feel it was taking on again too great a burden. But from the first, the idea took hold of the men. "The business will be really ours," was the general attitude.

In the afternoon of the next day, the wind dropped. The dust-laden air cleared. Not all the members could get in to Colfax to vote, but there were enough, Stephen saw. The voting didn't take long.

Just got in under the rope, thought Stephen, as he sent his telegram to Jo confirming the purchase of the Plant.

88

THE dust storm reached to the Atlantic coast. A fine haze dimmed the sun in the great eastern cities. In Washington and New York, dust lay in thin drifts along the windowsills of government and business houses.

The storm cost the farmers this year's corn, for the dry winds and dust had withered the tassels, dried out the pollen floating in the air before it reached the silks of the ears. The farmers must depend upon last year's surplus to carry them

through. Usually at such times corn sold at a good price. This year, as the weeks went by, the farmers realized they were caught. Corn gave every evidence of selling for less than it had for years.

But Stephen saw in this his opportunity for business. He knew that the Plant could pay the farmers more than the market price and still make a profit. "It's our chance," he explained to the men, "to make good with the farmers. Suppose we buy the last year's grain at a good price, if in return they settle that agreement to buy only the blend."

The plan met favor both with the men at the Plant and the farmers.

West of Colfax, in the great, barren tract of land now called the Dust Bowl, families faced starvation. And in regions where there were crops, corn was so cheap that farmers burned it, having no money for wood and coal. In the cities, the long queues of the unemployed and hungry had lengthened. But sealed in cribs and grain elevators were the great surpluses of corn and wheat, for which there was no market.

89

IN THE office of the Plant, Jonas Smith, with his feet wide apart, stood before the map, studying the red flags marking deliveries, studying the sales column. "Sales fell off last week."

"Well, why wouldn't they?" Blanche Wilson said resentfully. "Don't you hear the talk around town?"

"What talk?" Jonas swung around, confronting her.

"Things like our blend isn't good, and cars get stuck on the road when they use it. Heaven's sake, Jonas, don't stare at me like I was poison. I ain't making it up. Go and listen for yourself."

Stephen looked up from the papers on his desk. Of course, Blanche was inclined to dramatize a little. But later, he spoke

to Seaton. "Sales seem to be down a little, Paul. Blanche says there's talk. Have you heard any?"

"I haven't mentioned it," Paul answered. "But people around town seem to be getting lukewarm about the blend. I'm not a business man, I'm only a chemist, but I've known before, sometimes, of a new product that's started up as ours has—you know, a toothpaste or a breakfast food, or something—and then all at once everyone seems to get down on it and nobody buys it. You don't suppose the blend is going to be like that, do you?"

"No, I don't think so," said Stephen. "It's just the first interest wearing off."

But later, he had to face the fact that there was more than talk to the opposition.

The next morning Stephen called, "Come in," to a loud banging on the outside office door.

In strode a farmer who had taken the blend from him from time to time. "I knew there was something crooked about this outfit. Might have guessed if this stuff was any good the gas companies would be selling it themselves. I'm going to have you fellows arrested. You've told me false and spoiled my tractor."

"Hold on, there," said Stephen, rising. "If there's anything wrong, we'll make it right. Sit down, and let's talk it over."

"My tractor don't go."

"Wait a minute," said Stephen. "It couldn't have been our blend that's done that. What makes you think it is?"

"Fellow at the gas station said of course it was. Said I was a fool to experiment with a valuable machine like a tractor."

Stephen whirled around at his desk. "Blanche, ask Bebbidge to step in here, will you?"

When Bebbidge came, Stephen said, "Beb, this man's having trouble with his tractor."

"How old is your machine?" asked Bebbidge.

"Why, ten years or so. But I've always took good care of it,

and it's in good shape, or was, until I began using this stuff."

"What gasoline did you use before?"

The grade the farmer named was the cheapest gas on the market.

"Ten years on poor gas, and you blame your trouble on us!" Bebbidge exploded, irate as the farmer had been.

"Now, let's find out the real difficulty here," Stephen interposed. "I'll send out our own engineer, Bebbidge, here. Suppose he puts your machine in shape and you try it again. If we find anything wrong with our blend, we'll refund you what you've paid out on it, and Bebbidge'll do your repairs at our expense. If it's okay, as we've bought your corn, you'll go on using our blend."

The farmer considered. "Sounds fair enough. But I wish there was some way of knowing whether you fellows was on the level. I don't know's I want to promise what gas I'll use. You say you'll fix up my tractor for nothing?"

When Bebbidge came back, he waited for a chance to see Stephen alone. "I don't want the others to know yet, Steve. But as sure as I stand here, that blend of ours has got water in it. That was what was making the old guy's tractor act up."

"Did you check when he got the last lot?"

"Yep."

They both knew the water could not have been in the blend when it had left the Plant. Too many careful tests were being made before it was sent out.

"We can't have this kind of thing and stand up under it," Bebbidge added.

"Nobody gets started in a new thing without trouble." Stephen tried not to show his uneasiness.

"Guess I better be getting back to my engines. That's where I belong."

Stephen knew what Bebbidge was thinking. That perhaps they had someone among them who couldn't be trusted. The old bootlegging business a specter never seemingly quite done away with.

Bebbidge sat on a stool in a corner of the engine room, trying to work the thing out for himself. Somebody put that water in, I bet.

No, he wouldn't throw suspicion on another fellow, but after all, Ted Jones was the only one who had a chance to do it. But why? It was crazy. Jones'd be a fool. It would only ruin their market. Foul his own nest . . . why'd he do that? Bebbidge suspected that Ted had been in on the bootlegging. Once dishonest, a fellow was always dishonest. But that had been different . . . then, Ted had had something to gain. He's too smart not to see that it's to his own good to run straight.

Unless . . . suppose somebody offered him a good price—more than he's getting with us. After all, Ted hasn't got a very big share of the business.

Bebbidge picked up his long-spouted oil can and some waste. He'd feel better if he worked.

Stephen had just come into the office from lunch. Blanche was answering the telephone.

"Mr. Chase, it's happened again." She sat back in her chair, looking terribly scared. "Jack Peters is hung up on his plowing. His tractor's gone off, just like that other one. He's mad, and he blames us."

"Oh, come, Blanche. This isn't anything more than happens in any business." Stephen put all the firmness he could into his tone. "We mustn't get rattled. We'll get to the bottom of this, if we just don't lose our heads. I know I can trust you to keep still about it."

It wasn't long before Peters himself came in. There wasn't any friendliness about him today. He sat down by Stephen's desk. "I've come in to talk straight to you," he began. "I got my neighbors into this business. I put in my own money. It was our last hope, seeing what a glut corn is. I don't like what's going on. Didn't you have a good product? Is this all a sell?"

"Peters," said Stephen, "I don't know what's the matter

any more than you do. We made a good product for a year. It means we can. We may have run into some queer chemical difficulty, but I don't think so."

Peters studied Stephen's face. At last he spoke. "I'm inclined to believe my wife's right. She says you're straight. It's woman's reasoning, but I figure she's right."

"Thanks," said Stephen. "If you'll trust me a bit longer, it will help."

90

TED had stopped his truck in a small town for lunch—a town half-deserted in the last years. Several of the houses and stores stood empty. There were a few rails of interurban track at one end of the town, the relics of a line which had once run to and from Colfax. One of the old cars still stood upon the track, turned into a lunch counter. He often stopped there for a bite.

He drew up on a little patch of gravel where he could park his truck off the highway. The place was empty except for the girl at the counter. "Hello," he greeted her.

"Hello, yourself," said the girl. "What'll it be today?"

"Anything you got. Don't stir yourself up over it." Ted made a point of standing in with everyone. Good sales business, he always told himself. But today he forgot to put up the regular banter. He'd lost another customer that morning.

The girl bumped a hot dog and a glass of milk down on the counter in front of him. "Come down to earth. How's business?"

Ted took a hearty bite of his roll. "Fine," he mumbled, again alert with bright salesmanship.

"Look here, bub, I like to see a good guy get a break. Why've you got yourself placed with a bum outfit? That stuff of yours ain't goin' to go."

"You got a nerve," said Ted. "What do you know about it? Who do you think you are, anyway?"

"I know a lot more than you do, bright boy. Why don't you get next to what's going on, if you're so smart?"

"What's going on?" Ted eyed her over his glass.

"See that guy over at the gas station, talking to a man in a car? Well, he's showing him there's water in the stuff you sell. He's been doing that little thing for quite some time. If you don't believe me, go over and see for yourself."

"Thanks." Ted left the milk half-finished, searched in his pockets for change. He walked across the street, keeping himself hidden behind the body of the car.

"So you've been using that alcohol blend stuff," he heard the man say. "You better stick to gas. You say you're not running so good. Probably water in your carburetor. That blend, now, I'll show you how it works. Jed," he called, "bring those tubes out."

"Here you are." Jed held out a glass test tube.

"See how it's separated? The water's gone to the bottom. You can't expect your engine to run on water. The fellows that make that blend, well, I guess they mean all right, but they aren't experts. Can't help getting water in it, little one-hoss Plant like that."

"Where'd you get that?" Ted moved out from behind the car.

"Hello, Jones. You around again?"

"Yep. I'm around again. Where'd you get that stuff?" Ted pushed his hat to the back of his head. There was a hard light in his eyes.

"Got it from one of the farmers you sold it to. Want to make something of it?"

"You wouldn't lie, would you?"

"I don't 'low no one to say lie to me." The man moved belligerently toward Ted. He was bigger than Ted.

Ted took out a cigarette, coolly cupped his hand around a match. "Prove it, then. That little tube you got there don't mean a thing. Might have anything in it. How do I know you didn't wet the tube first?"

"All right. We'll take a sample from your tank car. Go along, Jed. Get a quart. We'll show him."

"No, you don't." Ted blocked the way. "No one's messing in with my tank. I'll drive it around here."

Ted went back across the highway to the space where he had parked the truck.

The counter girl was leaning out the back window. "Atta boy!" she called softly.

Ted stopped the tank in front of the gas station. "Well, go to it. I can watch you from here." He threw one foot over the other, leaned nonchalantly back in the seat.

The man unrolled the hose, filled his glass container. He held it up. "Have to wait a minute, now, until she settles. There. Look at that. That's what you been putting over on the public." He swung himself up by the wheel of the truck, thrust the glass container close to Ted's face. Ted saw an unmistakable division line between alcohol and water.

"Want to fight now? Come on down. I'll take you on."

Ted saw red. He'd twist that big squirt into a screw. Jumping down from the truck, he went for him. His first wild haymaker caught the man on the nose, knocked him flat. Ted picked up the fallen container, climbed back into his driver's seat. He threw in the clutch. "I'll be seeing you again," he shouted.

The guffaws of the men echoed in Ted's ears as the tank truck moved out into the road. He took the uneven highway at a dangerous speed.

Ted was still mad, still stinging from the taunts of the men, when he reached the Plant. At the door he met Bebbidge. "Something's wrong with our own outfit. Our distilling's off."

Bebbidge eyed him coldly. "That wasn't what I figured was wrong."

Ted hurried on into the office. "Where's Steve, Blanche?"

"He's somewhere in the Plant."

"Oh, for God's sake! Well, get hold of him quick."

"I don't know where to call him. Why you in such a hurry, Ted? You come in tomorrow and talk to Mr. Chase. He's got troubles enough today. I guess what you've got to say can wait."

"That's what you think. Something's gone wrong with the blend." Before Blanche could answer, Ted turned and went out. He ran along the steel steps and catwalks to the laboratory. "Hi, Paul," he called, opening the door. Then he saw Stephen. "Steve, I've been looking for you. I just plastered a man all over the map for saying there was water in the blend, but, by God, there *is* water in it." He put down the container he'd brought with him. "See? That's a sample out of the tank wagon. I let 'em take it." Ted sank down on a stool, wiped his forehead.

"Take a clean container, Ted," said Paul, "and get me another sample from the truck."

Coming back with the container, Ted met Bebbidge again.

"Say, Ted. You better not try any funny business with us. I'm on."

"What do you mean?"

"Think it over." Bebbidge turned and walked away.

Funny business? Ted realized suddenly what Bebbidge meant. They ought to know I wouldn't play a trick like that. How'll I prove it, though? I can't! he said to himself, in a panic before that terrible new experience—a man feeling his reputation going. He couldn't prove himself. He went in to Stephen.

"I want you and the men to choose somebody else to go on the tank wagon," he said.

"Why do you want us to do that?" asked Stephen.

Ted did not lift his eyes from the floor where he was pushing one foot back and forth, rubbing a few cigarette ashes into the floorboards. "You know as well as I do. I want to clear myself," he said finally. "You know what all the boys are thinking. I dunno, maybe you're thinking it, too."

Stephen, looking at him, remembered another man, that

man himself, feeling his reputation slipping away, and how powerless he had been to help himself. "Look, Ted," he said. "You're all wet. If the other men are suspicious, and I don't deny some of them may be, I am not. I've got my own suspicions as to what's happening and it's outside the Plant. Someone's been tampering with the tank wagon. I'm beginning to think there's a concerted effort to discredit the blend. Every test we've made proves the blend is just what it was last year."

"You're not trying to say I'm in on it?" Ted bristled with anger.

"No. But I'm rather inclined to think you're to blame, Ted. I'm saying what I said to you when I first came to the Plant. You haven't watched your tank just as you didn't watch the yeast. No doubt the blend in the tank has water in it, but supplies in the storage tanks haven't. Did you give the men at that gas station any chance to get at your truck?"

Ted's eyes fell. "I stop there for lunch."

"And where do you park your truck?"

"At the back."

"Exactly. And then what? You go in and eat your lunch and you jolly the girl a little, and if there are any men there you try to strut your sales stuff."

An angry flush rose in Ted's face. "Look here, Steve. I won't let any man talk to me like this. How was I to know?"

"Keep your shirt on, Ted. You've got to take your licking. You've been careless. You're thinking right now more of your own damn little hurt pride than you are of the reputation of the organization. This is no time to soothe your feelings. I'm going to call the men together and explain what's happened."

"We've got to meet a new type of competition," Stephen told the men. "As you all know, we've been getting complaints about the quality of the blend. Everything goes to prove that there is an organized effort to discredit our product. Whether it is purely a local movement caused by fear of

using a new fuel, or whether it's something more, nobody knows. That's not the point. The point is we've got to fight and to fight we've got to stick together.

"Ted suggests we put two men on the tank wagon, and I think it's a good idea. Some vandal or former employee may be trying to 'fix' us. That tank wagon can't be left unguarded. Also, Ted has had one fight in sticking up for the blend, and I don't want to send him out alone."

Ted was sitting a little apart from the other men, waiting, as he put it to himself, to be bawled out by Steve. But he isn't going to do it, he thought, with astonishment, lifting his head, seeing in the faces of the men admiration for him, as Stephen told them of the fight at the gas station.

As the men went back to their work after the conference, Bebbidge stopped Ted, holding out his hand. "Put it there, kid," he said. "I was all wet. Did you lick the guy?"

91

BLANCHE WILSON was lonely and bored. Being in business for herself wasn't so much fun as she'd thought it would be. The men didn't pay any more attention to her than they had before she'd invested. She'd had a secret hope that her three thousand dollars might win Ronald Bebbidge at last. But it hadn't. She was missing Eva and the children, and there wasn't any place now for her to get home dinners. And, yes . . . she'd even like to see Fred. She'd always felt sorry that she and Fred had parted enemies.

I bet I could fix things so Fred could get back his job at the Plant, she thought. I'm an owner, ain't I?

She considered the matter, feeling very businesslike and responsible. If there's going to be trouble with the blend, we need a good distiller, and Fred's better than Jonas Smith. She sent Eva a wire, saying that if Fred would come back, he might get into the Plant again.

Eva had already had a letter from Blanche, telling her the bungalow was empty. With the bungalow not rented, she didn't know how on earth they would get along. "Let's go back, Fred," she begged. "We've not been happy since we left it. Neither have the children."

They were sitting out in front of an auto camp—"motels," they called them, out here in the West. They hadn't been long in any place during the last year. With all Fred Stretz's brag about getting a job, he had found out that Chase had been right. But that didn't make him like Chase any better. They had had the rent from the bungalow sent on each month. Twenty dollars hadn't gone far, but that was all they'd had to live on most of the time.

Fred sat now, his hands dropped down between his knees. He and Eva hadn't been getting along too well, lately. When he thought of the bungalow, in reality he was thinking of Eva—the safety she'd given him then, which she didn't give him now. The bungalow and that shelter were indivisible in his mind. "I dunno," he said aloud. "I guess we might go back and see what's doing."

Fred Stretz found he had lost standing in Colfax. The men at the Plant showed no interest in him. They didn't want him in the Plant even if there was a job, and there wasn't any. Damn Blanche, for getting him back!

He was just a fellow who had wished himself out of a good job. Hadn't been smart enough to get in on the ground floor, as the other men had when the Plant started the new business. He was no longer a big fellow among his pals.

Of course, coming back to the bungalow had made Eva more the way she used to be, but she didn't seem to look up to him the way she had once. Whenever he came in, she was jumpy. And after he got a job, as night watchman at the bank, and was home a lot daytimes, she still fretted. And he didn't know what to do without his radio.

During his wanderings, Colfax had been all good things to him. Now, it looked down at the heel. He bragged about

the places he had seen, tossing off the names of cities and states with easy familiarity, trying to impress men, to hide his growing fear that he was a down-and-outer. He'd have to get on the road again. While he'd been on the road, he'd thought of Colfax. Now he was in Colfax, the road looked good to him.

He was going down a side street this afternoon, his hat low over his eyes, when he heard somebody calling his name.

"Hey, there, Fred! Been trailing you for a couple of blocks. What's the hurry?"

Fred looked up to see Si Burton. Remembering his last encounter with Si, Fred scowled angrily. "What you want with me? I finished with you a long while back."

"Out of work, Fred?" Burton looked him over with a practiced eye.

"What's it to you?"

"It happens I could use you."

"Need somebody to do your dirty work?"

"Don't hold a grudge, Fred. That won't get you anywhere." He paused. "You know, Fred, it won't pay you to be too touchy with me. I could still get you on a Federal charge, if I wanted to."

Stretz did not answer. His shoulders sagged, his belly sagged. He felt sick and beaten.

"However," Burton went on, "I don't want to. I've got nothing against you. In fact, as I say, I can throw some work your way. My car's here. How about taking a little ride with me?"

Once seated in the car, Fred felt more himself. After all, Si Burton was somebody to be riding with.

"Who you with now, Si?" he asked.

"Tied up with a number of things," Burton answered vaguely.

"You seem to be doin' pretty well," said Fred, impressed by the beautiful new car.

"Oh, not so bad. But let's get down to business. What I

want of you is easy, Fred. I'd like a line on the sales of the old Alcohol Plant. Blanche is still in the office, isn't she? I'll put you on a regular salary, if you'll get me the information I want."

"Why don't you go around and ask 'em? They're proud enough to tell most anything."

"You aren't much of a business man, Fred. In any business, you don't trust what a man tells you over his desk. You find out from the inside."

"What you want to know for?" asked Fred suspiciously.

Burton pulled out his wallet. "What you don't know, Fred, you won't ever have to tell. But there's no love lost between you and Chase, is there?"

"Hell, no!" said Fred. "That bastard! Pay in advance?"

"I don't know," Eva said to Blanche. "It doesn't seem the same. I liked it best when Fred was a working man. I liked washing his overalls. It don't seem right for him to be lounging around the town. I don't see how we can ever get along."

"I declare, Eva," said Blanche. "Here you are come home and Fred's job at the bank brings you enough to get along with, if you're careful. You got the kids back in school, instead of running around the country like little beggars," she added virtuously.

"I'd like it better," Eva reiterated stubbornly, "if Fred had his job at the Plant."

Fred, too, Blanche thought, seemed to find his real interest in the Plant. He was always asking her about it. Even his sneers didn't mask his curiosity. She took pleasure in telling him how well they'd been doing. When he was skeptical, she proved it to him, too. She was enormously proud of the Plant and the way business was picking up. Sometimes she was a little fearful afterward that she had told private things she shouldn't have, but how could it hurt anything to show Fred the Plant was getting on? Too bad it hadn't worked out for him to have his job back.

92

SEATON wished he could take a private room for Muriel at the hospital when the baby came, but he decided against it, what with doctor's bills and all. His family wasn't quite the drain it had been, for his brother-in-law had been given a minor place left vacant at the Plant. But there was a long winter ahead of them, and the baby must have everything he needed. They hoped he'd arrive before Christmas.

He did. Paul Second arrived at dawn on Christmas morning. Seaton spent his day at the hospital, with Muriel when they would let him, seeing his son when they would let him.

"There," said the nurse, finally putting the soft-wrapped bundle in Paul's arms. "Take him a minute. . . . And now you go home."

93

A LINE of independent gas stations in the state signed up for the blend, as they had call for it, the Plant to put in the pumps. A not inconsiderable order came in unexpectedly from Swift. It was no mean sale, either.

"I believe in mass farming," Swift told Stephen. "On a big tract like mine, you can use tractors and combines to big advantage and get the most out of your labor."

Some people hated him. Some admired him. "He got a chance to get rich and he took it," the men idling about Colfax said to one another. "By the hopping God, I would, too. A man can't be soft when he's building up a business, if he wants to be rich."

94

HESTER drove the car out the main highway toward the Peters farm. She was looking forward to this visit.

During the past months she had come to know quite well some of Stephen's former members in the business. She had seen a good deal of Mrs. Peters and Auntie, since that day in early fall when they had first appeared on her doorstep, Mrs. Peters shy and apologetic, Auntie belligerent and determined.

"We came in with Jack today," Mrs. Peters had begun, "and Auntie wanted to see you."

"'Course I did," said Auntie. "Why shouldn't I?" Her old eyes snapped. "Jorie, here, wouldn't make no friends if 'twan't for me. I see the day when I'd lose sight of a good fiddler!"

Hester had seen, as she had not on their first meeting, at the schoolhouse, how young Mrs. Peters was. Peters had met her, Hester came to know, during the winter term at the state agricultural college. A bride of a little more than a year, already the struggle to make ends meet had left its mark on her. She was too thin, and the prettiness that had probably attracted Peters to her was already waning. If she could have leisure, Hester thought, and a little money, she could get it back. But even with Jack's old aunt, wholly dependent upon them, who helped what she could, the farm housekeeping was too hard for Mrs. Peters.

This was the first day Mrs. Peters had asked her to come to see *them*.

There was no brightness in the landscape. The trees, broken and bent by the winds, were bare and brown. Dust clung to them. The fields were the color of old hay. There had been no snow. As Hester turned into the dirt road leading to the Peters farm, she could see everywhere in the bordering fields the grim effort Peters was making to circumvent erosion. In one field he had back-furrowed heavy ridges to check washing. He was putting back into pasture fields which should never have been plowed. Where he had sowed winter wheat, it was coming up in uneven patches, and in his cornfields the weathered shocks stood infrequent and thin.

A bend in the road and the Peters' boxlike house stood out starkly. It was a type designed for town, and seemed to look more bleak because of that, standing alone on the prairie without background. But as Hester drove in, she saw, looming up behind it, the barns, lending a functional beauty to the grouped buildings.

Mrs. Peters had come into the yard and stood looking out toward the road. She came forward a little nervously to greet Hester. They went through the kitchen into the front room.

Auntie, anticipating the visit with gusto, had put on her best dress, an ancient bombazine made with a basque, and sat in state in the rocking chair by the airtight stove. "You ain't brought your fiddle!" she said, with a child's disappointment.

"Yes, I have," said Hester. "It's on the kitchen table." She sat down opposite Auntie.

In one corner of the room stood the case of an old-fashioned organ remodeled into a desk, its cubbyholes stuffed with papers and what appeared to be farm records. Beside it, on an oak stand, was a small radio. Through the bay window, Hester could see stark prairie stretching away for miles to the horizon, the grey asphalt of the main highway west cutting it into two parts.

She had a sudden desire to know whether the Tuttle Farm Program had ever reached this farmhouse. "Auntie," she asked, "did you ever listen to the program a year or two ago given by the Tuttle Company?"

"No, no," said Auntie, shaking her head.

"Oh, but you did, Auntie! Don't you remember?" said Mrs. Peters. "You liked it when the violins played."

"Violins!" said Auntie with a snort. "Fiddles! I got a new song for you," she went on. "I been a-thinkin' of it up. I ain't sung it for long years, not since we sung it to my gram-paw's funeral . . . it's sad. He's buried over beyond the draw. We don't own that land no more."

"Never mind, Auntie," said Mrs. Peters. "Jack's got all the land he can tend to."

Auntie, bridling, came out of her reverie. "No, he ain't, Jorie! My paw tended three times it, and with hosses, too."

Mrs. Peters got up, set up a card table close to Auntie, laid over it a cloth embroidered with sprays of wild roses. She brought in coffee and cakes.

"Auntie, now you wait," she said, patting Auntie's shoulder lightly.

But Auntie reached out her hand, twisted with rheumatism, took a cup cake. "I'm hungry," she said, "and food's to be et." She looked at Jorie, her face crinkling, knowing she really wouldn't be scolded.

Just then Peters himself came in. He had on very clean blue overalls and shirt. Hester suspected he had changed from his work clothes for her visit. His tall frame gave an impression of squareness, due partially to the stiff, unyielding lines of his overalls. His head, narrow and small, looked out of proportion to his broad shoulders. His eyes were intelligent.

"How d'you do, Mrs. Chase." Peters spoke with a long, slow drawl. "Thought I smelled coffee. And there's Auntie stuffing herself again!"

Auntie cackled. "It's come to me in my declinin' days to have enough so's I *can* stuff." She turned proudly to Jack.

Hester, looking at them, saw that Auntie, who had had little chance in her life to satisfy that gusto of hers for living—for gaiety and merriment and food—was finding it now with Jack and Jorie. And Jack and Jorie weren't letting her know how hard pressed they were.

"I thought maybe you'd like to see the farm," Jack Peters said.

The farm, the farm work, were something to be proud of, Hester realized, just as she realized, when they reached the

barn, that Peters was prouder of it than he was of his house. He had been digging a ditch to lay pipes from the well into the stable. It was hard digging, the ground dry and caked by the drought. "My winter wheat I've got to plant over," he told her. "But it won't grow if we don't get rain."

They walked out to the field where Peters kept his hogs. Sleek, golden red. He fed them, carrying bushel baskets full of corn ears. The hogs scraped the kernels off with their sharp teeth.

As Hester got into her car, Mrs. Peters stood for a moment resting her hands on the car door. "Do come again, Mrs. Chase. It's been lovely to have you." Suddenly the barriers went down. "If I have something to look forward to, I won't mind the work. Jack's such a good farmer, and now that the Plant's making a market for corn . . . oh, if we can only make a crop this year!"

Heavy clouds of dust rose in menacing drifts. The water-courses were dried to a trickle. Trees and bushes bordering them were marked a few feet up with dried mud. The sloughs where cattle had drunk were empty, the mud at the bottom cracked open. Drought was apparent everywhere.

The early winter dusk was falling as Hester drove into Colfax. Under the arc light near the bank, she was surprised to see a long, quiet queue of men and women. I wonder what that is, she thought. The bank closes at three.

She stopped the car, but before she saw anyone she knew to question, the side door of the bank opened and Mr. Evans stood on the step. His precise, old voice addressed the crowd. "The bank will open as usual, tomorrow. It would help us if you don't draw out your money, but we are prepared to pay, if you insist upon doing so."

"By golly, he's cool!" Hester heard one man say to another. "He doesn't act as if he's afraid of the bank failing."

A run on the bank! Hester thought, with a sense of disaster. How would it affect her and Stephen? And the Plant? Why, Evans had been the whole town's security.

She drove around to the Plant to pick up Stephen. "Did you know," she asked him, "about the bank?"

"I didn't," said Stephen, "until Blanche came back from lunch pretty excited and nervous, telling me the bank had failed. I didn't think much about it—you know Blanche—until the men came in with the same story."

"How bad is it, Stephen?"

"I telephoned the bank. One of the girls answered. She said Mr. Evans had told her to tell anyone who called that the bank hadn't failed and wasn't going to."

"That's what he was saying to the people when I came by, just now," said Hester.

As they drove past Mr. Evans' house, he was just getting out of his car. Sparse and dapper, the old banker made his usual crisp bow.

"Whatever's going on, he seems to be unmoved by it," said Stephen. "He doesn't look like a defeated man. I have an idea they'll pull through."

"If he doesn't—" Hester hesitated. "It means we'll go under, too, doesn't it?"

"Yes," said Stephen.

That Evans had put his own and his wife's private fortune in to bolster up the bank that day, Evans did not intend anyone to know. The two had agreed, very calmly, when things had begun to look bad, that that was the only thing they could do in case of a run on the bank.

"The bank, my dear," he had said to his wife, in his usual dry tone, "has carried the Evans name for two generations now."

"Of course," Mrs. Evans had answered.

Mr. Evans opened the front door of his house with his latchkey. An electric button was snapped above. Mrs. Evans always snapped the button at the precise moment of his entrance and descended the stairs to meet him. The light caught the pompadour of her white hair. She had never changed from the Gibson style of hairdress. He noticed her

veined old hand and the sparkle of her rings as she stopped at the foot of the stairs, her hand on the post.

"You are late, my dear," she said.

"Yes, a little. We've been very busy at the bank today."

There was spirit in Mrs. Evans' manner as she advanced with him to the parlor where they sat in the evenings. "Did it take it all?" she asked.

"Nearly," he answered. "But we'll get through if the people show sense tomorrow."

"I've been thinking," said Mrs. Evans, "that now we're getting older, a smaller house would suit us better."

"It might be a good plan," Evans answered her, and picked up his paper.

Colfax's small panic was over. The crisis was past. Man after man in the community began to realize that Colfax wasn't going to die, as so many towns had. People again decided to trust to the bank what money they had. There were small signs of recovery in business.

95

AT THE Plant, one morning, a link gave way in the chain lifting the grain buckets. Not a serious accident, but it delayed operations a few hours. Two days later, a fire from grain dust broke out in the head house, threatened the whole Plant before they got it under control. Stackpole found afterward that the cyclone machinery hadn't been working as it should. Then they lost a brew from bad yeast.

Each accident appeared to be the carelessness of someone in the Plant. But the men were puzzled, certain that they had done their work well.

Stackpole came to Stephen. "I've checked up on this bunch of bad luck we're having. There wasn't one of them acci-

dents that seemed reasonable. The point is, they wasn't accidents."

Stephen stared at him. A man trained as Stackpole had been in warehouses couldn't be fooled. "What do you mean, Stack?"

"Paul Seaton was here late last night, working on his yeast tests. He tells me he saw a feller in the Plant. Paul thought first it was Clancy, the watchman, but when he called to him, the feller didn't answer and eased out of sight. Afterward, Paul says, he hunted up Clancy and it wasn't him."

"How could he have got in?" said Stephen slowly.

"Can't say. But I'll try to find out."

"I think," said Stephen, "we'd better call a meeting of the executive committee." Stackpole, Bebbidge, Paul Seaton, all steady men who wouldn't lose their heads, Stephen felt.

He explained the nature of the accidents to them. "I'm afraid it's sabotage. I've asked Stack, here, to explain sabotage as he sees it. He's had practical experience with it."

Bebbidge and Seaton did not speak, waiting for Stackpole.

"This is the way I see it," Stackpole began. "'Most always, it's only trifling stuff. Course, tinkering with the cyclone machinery wasn't trifling. But speaking in general, it's done to worry the men. After a while they get so jittery when things keep on happening that they don't do good work, and they get to blaming each other. It's a way to hurt a business. Paul, tell what you saw last night."

"You weren't near enough to see who the guy was?" asked Bebbidge.

Paul shook his head.

"No use spending time thinking who did it," said Stephen. "That's apt to make us suspicious of each other. That divides the men, and that's what whoever did it wants."

"What we got to do," Stackpole went on, "is to try to be so careful there ain't a chance for a thing to happen. I'd like to see the Plant closed for a few days while we go over the machinery—every damn bolt in the Plant. All the wiring.

"We can do it ourselves. We got the training. Then when we start, we ought to be able to keep check. The Plant needs an overhauling, anyway."

Stackpole's suggestion proved a good one. They found weaknesses here and there which might have led to accidents later.

When they opened again, each man pulled his own weight. The new menace, Stephen found, was a tool that could be used to weld the organization together. There was no suspicion of one another this time, as there had been with the watered alcohol. The efficiency of the Plant increased. The men learned in the weeks that followed to be careful to a degree which they had never before required of themselves. The Plant hummed with activity.

Stackpole, as he made his rounds, took deep satisfaction in the work. He'd never seen sabotage stamped out in any better fashion. You couldn't beat it, having a lot of men together who had their own money in. What more could a man ask than a business like this, growing, and the men doing their part?

96

SEATON had stopped in the office this morning. He and Stephen were working out a new process for starting yeast. Heretofore they had had to pay for the cultures to be sent them from the Wisconsin breweries. Stephen had dropped a remark one day about the way the Chinese, in making wine, grew their own cultures, in a glutinous substance called bean curd, and it had set Seaton to thinking that they might themselves do something like that. He believed he had worked it out.

Stackpole met him on the catwalk leading up to the laboratory.

"I think we've got it," said Paul. "I'll need a test or so to clinch it."

"Ye have, have ye? You're a fine lad, ye are." Stackpole, in moments of excitement, sometimes fell into his wife's manner of speaking. He was on his way up to the head house for his daily inspection to make sure the cyclones were working. He took no chances now.

"Stop in on your way back," Paul called after him. "I'll show you how it'll cut laboratory expenses."

"Sure. I'll be in as soon as I can."

He found everything shipshape in the head house. As he came down, Ted stopped him.

"I've got to fill up the truck again, today. Got some extra orders. Can you come out a few minutes? You know, Stack, if this keeps up, we're going to have to have another tank wagon."

"Okay," said Stackpole, "I'll see to it now, if you're ready."

It was near noon before Stackpole got around to the laboratory again. The light in the dark corner outside the door was off. He made a mental note to replace the bulb.

"Couldn't get in before, Paul," he said, as he hurried in.

There was no answer.

"Hey!" called Stackpole. Paul must have gone out somewhere.

Then he noticed that the door of the big icebox stood open. "Careless thing to do," he muttered, "with all that yeast in there."

He started over to shut it. Then he saw Paul, slumped against the end of the icebox. He was lying in a puddle of water.

"Paul! What is it?" The old man bent over him, then raced for the telephone. "Give me Steve, quick!" he said to Blanche. "Steve? Get Hodges. There's been an accident up here in the laboratory. Paul . . ."

Hodges got up from his knees. "Nothing I can do," he said.

Stephen, standing beside him, his heart sick, took in the whole scene. The water still dripping through the open door

of the disconnected icebox. The loose, dangling electric wire over Paul's head. Cut by someone. Cut by whom?

Stackpole said, "He must have been seeing why his icebox was off. That's why the light was off, too, outside the door. I see it. I see when I come in I got to put in a new bulb. All I done to stop the accidents, and now—"

Stephen put his hand on Stackpole's shoulder.

"Tend to things here," he said, after a moment. "I've got to get over to Mrs. Seaton as fast as I can."

Stephen rang the bell at the Seaton's small grey house. Muriel, the baby in her arms, led him into the back room that did duty for dining and sitting room.

"Mr. Chase, is anything wrong?"

"Yes . . ."

"You mean Paul . . ." She stopped. "But this is his baby," she urged, as if somehow that young life refuted death.

Stephen helplessly wondered what to say. He wished he had stopped to get Hester. Then with relief he saw Tiny Jones come into the room. With a little rush she reached Muriel's side. Quietly Stephen went away.

Late in the afternoon, a policeman and the coroner clattered along the steel catwalks, down the stairs, out of the building. The place was very still, the Plant shut down. The Plant men stood below, in two lines between which the stretcher should be borne. As the four men carrying Seaton's dead body covered with a blanket moved out of the door, the men broke up into angry groups.

Stackpole, his shoulders more bent than ever, motioned Bebbidge and Ted to follow him back into the Plant. "Look. We've got a job to do. We can't stop now till we find out who done this."

"How can we find out?" said Ted dazedly.

"I dunno," said Stackpole. "There's one thing I do know, that feller who's been doing all this damage knows the Plant from A to Z."

"That's right," said Bebbidge. "He'd have to."

"Then," said Stackpole, "who is it? We know it ain't one of us."

"Fred Stretz, by God!" said Ted. "He's got a key. Burton gave it to him." He stopped. "I never thought of it," he said miserably.

"Don't say too much, kid," said Stackpole, quickly. "But that's how I figure it, too."

"He's got a new radio," said Bebbidge, "and he's been bragging to me about getting a new Chevvy. And him night watchman at the bank! It's what Steve figgered. There's somebody back of him. Some nut with money."

"But nobody'd kill Paul!" said Ted. "Maybe they cut that wire just to make trouble."

"Hold on," said Stackpole. "You remember that feller Paul saw in the Plant that night? Spos'n it was Stretz and he thought Paul knew who he was?"

"If he done that," said Bebbidge, "he'll hang for it."

"That ain't the point, Beb," said Stackpole. "We want to find out if anybody hired him. He's in on it, all right, but we can't prove it. We got to make him believe we got the goods on him. My idea is to scare him, see if we can't trip him up."

"Come on, then," said Bebbidge grimly.

As the big iron door of the Plant closed behind the three, Pat Horan swung down the ladder from the cooker deck, where he had been standing in shadow above them. So that's how it was, he said to himself. He'll hang, all right, once me and the boys git to him!

IN THE early evening, at the Stretz bungalow, Fred sat by his radio. He liked it loud, these days. The doorbell rang. Fred

got up, opened the door, saw his old comrades standing on the porch.

"We want to have a little talk with you, Fred. Come out here and shut the door."

"Not on your life. I ain't that easy." Fred drew back into the lighted hall.

"We ain't trying anything on," said Stackpole. "We just think you'd rather not have your missus hear what we got to say."

Fred came out, closed the door. "Well, say it, and get yourselves off the premises."

"We got the goods on you, Fred. We don't know who else was in on this, but we can prove you were, all right."

It was a shot in the dark, but Fred's face seemed to tighten all over. He spoke defiantly. "You tryin' to say I had anything to do with Paul bein' killed? I got an alibi you poor stiff's can't break. I wasn't in town last night."

"Look here, Fred," said Bebbidge. "You was left holding the bag once. Don't be a fool. It's always the little feller has to pay. This time, it'll be hanging, and you'll be the fall guy."

"You come clean and we'll give you a chance to get out of town," said Stackpole.

"If there's anything left of you to get out of town," said Ted. "There's lynching talk all over the county, only most folks don't know what we know."

"You don't scare me any," blustered Fred. "I'll take my own time to get out of town."

"All right," said Stackpole, "we've warned you. Either you get in touch with me tonight, or the next call you get will be from the cops."

Fred turned, slammed the door in their faces.

"Didn't get very far with that, did we?" said Bebbidge.

"Well, wait a while," said Stackpole. "He'll think it over."

Fred, once the door was shut, put his back against it, looked at Eva standing in the doorway to the living room.

"Fred!" cried Eva. "What's all the trouble? What did the men from the Plant want of you? What are they after you for? Have you done anything? Fred?"

"Eva," he said. "I got to go. I ain't done nothing, Eva, but they say they got proof I did. They've always had the hooks into me. I been as straight as I could. It might a been any one of them."

Against her continued silence, he grew frantic. "Oh, so you think I'm a murderer, too, do you? Well, say so! Don't stand there!"

And suddenly, Eva knew he was. A hundred little things fitted together . . . that Fred had been a dishonest man for years. Little lies he'd told her about going places to see men, wage raises that seemed too big. This new car, he hadn't even tried to explain that. She was helpless and terrified before the revelation that this man on whom she had relied was a criminal. And yet, she couldn't be without him. She couldn't face that.

Fred took up his hat, grabbed his overcoat.

"Fred, you can't leave me. I got to go, too."

He turned to her, his face working. "I guess I can't. Get the kids, Eva. No . . . I'll get 'em. You pack a few things. Hurry. There ain't time for anything."

Slim had kept the grocery store open this evening. Excitement around the town always meant trade.

"I call it plain murder," said a tall farmer, leaning over the counter.

"Maybe it warn't meant so," said another. "They couldn't have wanted to kill nobody. What they aimed at was to put the Plant out of business."

"How come you know so much about it?"

"Oh, gosh, Bill, only what I heard tell."

"Well, I'll say," said the tall man, "that something's damn wrong with the country, when men can't run a peaceable business without having their machinery busted up."

That's lawless. I'd be for stringin' up whoever did it, if we could get 'em."

A little, old be-spectacled man spoke. "Look here, boys. I've lived in Colfax a long time, and I seen the time when it was all fixed to be a big city. How about the factory them other towns took away from us? What's happened to any business that ever tried to start up in Colfax? I 'low as how it's them same folks that's done this."

"You better not call names."

The old man looked around apprehensively. "I never. But you mind what I say."

"More like it was someone who's got a grudge." The tall farmer unwound his legs from the counter stool. "I don't know how the rest of you boys feel," he said, "but from now on, I'm running my farm machinery on this-here alcohol blend. We can't bring that poor feller back to life, but we do have a responsibility to this town's business."

"Yep," said another. "What they need's a market. We got to see they get one. From now on, they get my business, too. Gimme a quarter-pound of coffee, Slim. I got to be on my way."

He started toward the door, stepped back, as it opened abruptly. Four men came in headed by Pat Horan.

"Hey, where's the fire?" said the farmer.

"You boys want to come with us?" said Pat. "We're going to string up the bastard that killed Paul Seaton."

The hideous mass voice reached Stephen and Hester in their house, a sound known long ago, almost forgotten, since they had left China.

"It's a mob!" cried Hester, drawing Timothy close. "Oh, Stephen, what's happening?"

Stephen went to the window, stood looking into the darkness.

The group of men going toward Stretz's house had gathered to it the idle and the disgruntled of the town—the discon-

tented, the insecure, the disquieted, the undernourished. The crowd, in the must of its frustration, moved toward violence, in violence its release.

But Eva's brown bungalow was dark and empty.

98

WHAT hard work had not yet done, what money had failed to do, Seaton's death accomplished. The emotional resistance of people in town and country to a new thing was, it seemed, broken down. The blend, which once had been jokingly called "moonshine," was now defended with an ardor almost patriotic.

The day after Seaton's funeral, when the Plant opened, new orders began coming in over the telephone. Blanche sat, tight-lipped, at her desk taking them down.

99

HESTER was watching Stephen come up the walk. She was always thankful to see him come safely home, these days. It was two weeks since Seaton's death, but no one yet could escape the sense of danger that hung over the Plant.

"Something wrong, dear?" she asked anxiously, for as Stephen entered, she noticed he was absorbed, as he was in times of difficulty.

"I don't know," he said, sitting down. "A man came into the Plant today and asked to have a confidential talk with me. Asked me if I'd have luncheon with him. He's made us an offer for the business, Hester . . . named a tremendous price. Four or five times what the Plant's worth, with its business and its good will combined. He says he wants to keep all the men on, as long as they're satisfactory. He offered me the managership."

"What does it mean, Stephen?"

"I think he's representing some concern that wants to buy the Plant so as to close it. Nobody in his senses would offer such a price if he were going to make any money out of it."

"Have you taken it up with the men?"

"I've called a meeting for tomorrow afternoon."

"And you think . . . ?"

"I'm afraid they'll sell," said Stephen. "If we'd had a little longer time . . . you can't blame the men, really, Hester, if they do take the offer. We're pretty jittery down there since Paul's death. The farmers, of course, won't vote for it. It means the end of this new market for them. But I don't know. I'm afraid the vote will go against them."

"And you, Stephen?"

"No. I won't go in on it. I'd rather be out before the Plant's closed down. Of course," he said with a kind of twisted smile, "it's a pretty good return. Doubled my investments during depression." Then he couldn't pretend any longer. "Jo and I thought we had the opposition licked, when we arranged for the men to buy the property. If we hadn't bought it, the men wouldn't have the right to sell. We've been reached in the end through our pocket-books."

Stephen felt helpless. He had hoped after Seaton's death and Stretz's disappearance that the Plant would be let alone. A terrible price to pay, but now that it was paid, the little organization, tried in so many ways, seemed invulnerable. No threat from the outside had been able to divide them. But this threat from within . . . what would it do to them?

Once Hester would have been happy and relieved at so successful a way out of the business, but now she and Stephen were inextricably bound into it. Since that meeting a year ago at the schoolhouse, she had been drawn deeper and deeper into the struggles of the community. "Do you think there's any chance of their voting that offer down, Stephen? It would be something, wouldn't it, if they did?"

"Coming right now, it's a big temptation. I don't know what they'll do."

"There's Stackpole . . . we can count on him."

"Yes. And Ted Jones, queer as it may seem." Stephen was led into hoping. In the last two weeks, he had found that he could rely upon Ted as he had once relied upon Paul. He thought of Ted as he had seen him in the laboratory that morning, carrying on in Paul's place, whistling to keep up his courage in the room where his friend had been killed.

"And Peters," said Hester. "Of course it's to his advantage not to sell."

So they weighed them all, one by one, the advantages and disadvantages to each man in selling, Jonas Smith the only one who would want to hold on for an ideal.

100

THE electric lights were turned on in the office. The grey February afternoon had settled down early. Peters' old car was drawn up at the curb. He'd come for the meeting. All the farmer members were there. What with the men from the Plant, the room was full.

Stephen told them briefly of the offer. Nobody for a moment did anything but stare. Then everyone seemed to want to talk at once.

"I think it's only fair to tell you, from my business experience, what I think this offer means," Stephen urged.

"Do I get you," Peters asked, the moment Stephen stopped talking, "that somebody wants to kill the business? I'm against selling."

"That's the way you talk. What about us here in the Plant that holds the bag?" It was one of the unskilled laborers of the Plant speaking. "We've been scared of our lives for a couple of months back. I say, sell. Get out of it with whole skins and money in our pockets."

"You mean," said Bebbidge, "if this thing is what they say it is, we'd have a job, regular wages, no responsibility, and we'd make money on it besides?"

"That's what it seems to be now," Stephen said. "But they're under no obligation, you understand, to keep the Plant open."

"Look here, boys," said Stackpole. He looked very bent and old. "Take my advice. Don't do it. A promise like that ain't worth anything. We're signing away our jobs if we take up with it. You won't be your own boss any more. And what you got? A little ready cash!"

"A little!" shouted someone. "You mean a lot!"

"Do you think, Steve," said Jonas Smith, "that they'd buy my formula?"

"I imagine if the thing is what I think it is, you'll get any price you want to set, Jonas, if you hold out for it."

"Jonas," said Ted, "you taught me my sales talk, and it was that this blend of yours was going to save the farmer. Are you selling that, too?"

"I don't know," said Jonas. "With what I'd get for it, I could—"

"I say sell," interrupted Blanche. "With what they're offering us, I'd be on easy street. I don't want to keep books all my life."

Stephen made a last appeal. "Think it through. We've come through a lot of trouble. We're just ready to cash in on the work we've done. You may not see so much money, right now, but you've got a sure thing. Suppose you sell, and the Plant closes up inside of six months. Where would you be then?" His voice, usually so low-pitched and even, rose in pleading. "We've worked hard to build up this business. We've built it on promises. Do you want to keep those promises, or do we just want to be another outfit folding up when it suits our own interests?"

"Exactly!" shouted Peters. "What are you doing to us?"

A chorus of voices rose. Stephen watched the work of these

hard years fall to pieces. These men only yesterday pulling together, now divided by dissatisfaction and greed.

He saw, before the vote was taken, how it was going.

Hester had driven down to the Plant with Stephen. She waited outside in the car. Ahead of her, in the long line of parked machines, she could see the Stackpoles' old sedan, Mrs. Stackpole sitting immobile on the front seat.

From her vantage point in the car, Hester could just see through the high windows of the office, the men's heads. She followed the alternate currents of feeling by watching Stephen, who was facing her.

He's lost. They're going to sell. She could tell by the set expression on his face. Somehow we must find our place in this community. We've put down roots, she thought.

The door opened and the men came pouring out, shouting and gesticulating at each other. As they streamed past, she caught a glimpse of Jack Peters' face, grim and bitter. Hester got out of the car and went in.

The office looked bare and unkempt, the floor muddy from the men's feet. On the wall above Stephen, hung the bright-colored calendar, advertising perfumery. Stephen's desk was littered with bits of paper . . . the written vote. He stood turning them over with his fingers.

"One vote more, and we'd have won, Hester. If only Jonas—" He stopped. There came over him a sudden feeling of being rudderless, after all the drive and push and struggle, back where he had been three years ago.

But no, he wasn't. Those three years had toughened and strengthened him, and they had Hester, too. He could count on her to the last ditch. "Hester," he said, "I don't believe we're quite licked."

"Well, you know, I guess we aren't." Her courage leaped up to meet his. When she had come in, she had feared that he would be utterly discouraged. But he wasn't. Well, then, of course they weren't licked.

"The vote was a lot closer than I thought it would be. I'd

like to try this sort of thing again, in another part of the country. It took them a long time to break us. Maybe they can't, next time. They're putting money in my hands. I could take Stackpole and Ted with me, and I've a feeling young Jo would go in on it."

Hester started to speak, but seeing him standing there, not accepting defeat, the words choked her.

He looked at her with a half smile. "You won't mind moving again, Hester?"

